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1894

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The Youngest Miss Mowbray
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The Turnstile of Night
The Silent Battle

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"The sense of helplessness overcame her, and forced her into a crouching attitude beside the door." p. 145.



JACOBI'S WIFE

A NOVEL

By
ADELINE SERGEANT

Author of
"Kitty Holden," "A Soul Apart,"
etc., etc.

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JACOBI'S WIFE

PROLOGUE

WRITTEN BY OLIVER BURNETT LYNN, M.D.

CHAPTER I

THE WRECK

THE collision between the schooner *Mary Jane*, bound for New York from Liverpool, and the *Ariadne*, American man-of-war, took place at daybreak on the 13th of March, 1870. I have been requested by one of my friends to put in writing a statement concerning the events of which I was a witness.

The *Mary Jane* carried very few passengers. She was not insured. In fact, she was reputed to be so unseaworthy that it was thought probable she would not make another trip; and few people would have cared to entrust their lives or their goods to her had they known all that I learned about her during my voyage. The captain was a weak sort of a man, with no authority, but a great capacity for bluster; the crew were as rowdy a lot as ever I saw in my life, and that is saying a good deal. Heavy fogs came on before we were half-way across, and I think the captain lost his bearings. The only thorough good seaman on board was James Crosbie, the first mate, and Captain Banks manifested a curious jealousy of him. It was owing to this jealousy that proper precautions were not taken concerning signal-lights on the morning of the 13th of March. Mr. Crosbie

reminded the captain of them, and was abused for his pains. He remonstrated gently. "Do you command this ship, sir, or do I?" roared the captain. "Speak another word, and I'll have you put in irons till we land." Crosbie shrugged his shoulders as he turned away. "If we go to the bottom, it won't be my fault," he muttered to himself.

It was about six in the morning when the collision took place. Out of the fog a great black mass suddenly bore down upon us, threatening to crush us out of existence at a moment's notice. There was no possibility of avoiding it. The absence of lights and the carelessness of the watch had been fatal. I think we all believed that our last hour had struck.

The crash came. There was a moment of horrible terror, confusion, destruction. We heard the crack of the timbers—saw the white waves leap over us—believed that in another second the black bulk of the great ironclad would press us down and shiver us like a child's toy. There was a great noise in our ears; shouting, screaming, the hissing of steam, the rush of waves, the rending asunder of solid wood and iron: then we knew that all was over, and I think that each of us fancied himself, for one bitter moment, to be the only survivor of the wreck. Several men—I do not know how many—had been swept into the waters, where they were sucked in by the waves beneath the ship, and perished. We who remained found ourselves still afloat upon a wrecked and ruined mass of timber, hardly to be called a ship; still not utterly engulfed, and therefore still possessing a chance for life. We were at any rate able to keep ourselves above water until the ship which had run us down should lower her boats and send men to our assistance.

The commander of that vessel certainly deserved all the punishment which he has since received—and I had a hand myself in bringing it home to him—for his conduct on this occasion. Seeing that we were still afloat, he did not pause a moment to offer us any aid. Swiftly, steadily, little harmed by the mischief that had been done, the great ship steamed away from us behind the veil of fog. Then a cry went up from the narrow deck of the disabled

schooner, a cry of cursing and indignation from the hearts of some, of fear and anguish from the hearts of others. I am told that the shrill wail of the poor souls thus left to perish was heard on board the *Ariadne* as it passed. I do not know whether this was possible; but one thing I do know, that if there is a Heaven above us, that cry must have pierced the ears of God!

We were said to be sinking fast. The fog was thick around us and above us; we knew not whether we could hope to reach the land—which was not very distant—by means of boats or planks. There was no time in which to construct a raft, and even a good swimmer might well despair of gaining the coast before his limbs were cramped with cold, or his strength was exhausted by fatigue. In the agony of the moment I heard men round me cursing the ship that had left us to our fate as if it had been a sentient, conscious thing.

Those who were yet living—neither swept away by the rush of water nor crushed by the falling of masts and rigging—were huddled together on the deck. The captain was among them. I have mentioned, I think, that I considered him a fool. He now showed that he was a coward, too.

I noticed that his face was white and his hand shaking, and resolved to keep my eye upon him. One of the sailors turned to him with an oath. "Why the devil didn't you hang out the lamps?" said the man, roughly. "You've killed the lot of us, — you!"

I made a stride forward, but I knew I was too late. The captain, a ghastly object, with blue lips and scared, strained eyes, had already backed towards his half-shattered cabin. I entered it after him, saw him standing by the table with a pistol in his hand, was just in time to see him lift it to his head and pull the trigger. He fell forward at my feet, dead; he had blown his brains out.

Well, there was no time to waste in regrets. I returned to the deck and found that the men seemed to have gone mad, one and all. They were fighting for possession of the boat which remained uninjured. So many jumped into it that it sank before it had gone half-a-dozen

yards from the ship. We could hear their wild, fruitless cries for help, and see for a moment the white faces and struggling limbs upon the water. But not for long. I believe that not one of these men escaped with life.

"Ten minutes more," said the mate, looking keenly around him, "or, at the most, a quarter of an hour. We may as well say our prayers, doctor, if we have got any to say. It's all over with us."

"Can we do nothing? What demons these men are!"

"Brutes, not demons," said Crosbie. "They've got at the brandy now. No, there's nothing to be done. We haven't time."

A young girl laid her hand on my arm. "Oh, Doctor Burnett Lynn," she said, "can't you save us?"

I could only beg her not to be frightened, to take courage and trust in Providence. She turned away her head and burst into tears. She was going out to her lover in New England, and he might never hear what had become of her. That was her grief, poor thing!

A little boy—a fine little fellow of five—came up and caught hold of my coat. He wanted to know why his mamma lay on the ground and wouldn't speak to him. I went with him to find out why. When I saw her I knew she had been instantly killed by the falling of some heavy substance upon her head, but I did not say so. I took the boy in my arms and told him to look at the pretty waves until mamma awoke. I thought we should all be dead before he asked for her again. She was the loveliest woman I ever saw.

There was an old man fastening a life-belt round his body, when two ruffians sprang upon him from behind, and before we could interfere, knocked him down and snatched his life-belt from him. He lay senseless and bleeding upon the deck, whilst they fought for the final possession of his treasure.

Three or four had tapped a cask of brandy, and sat round it, drinking, singing, shouting, as if they had lost their wits. And all the time the ship was slowly, slowly settling down into deep water. It would turn on its side soon, and then all would indeed be over.

As I waited silently for the last moment, my eye was caught by the figures of three persons whom I had not previously noticed—a man, a woman and a little child. They were known amongst us by the names of Mr, and Mrs. Jacobi, with their infant daughter. I will say a word or two about them before proceeding further.

The man—Constantine Jacobi, as he called himself—was generally thought to be a Spaniard. He said that he was Spanish by extraction only, and that he had spent nearly all his life in England and Germany. He spoke German almost as well as Spanish, certainly, but he used English in speaking to his wife, and used it with singular correctness.

He was rather a small man, lean, supple and muscular. His complexion was singularly pallid; it had a yellowish pallor, like that of a face carved in antique ivory. His hair curled in small, dark rings above his low, broad forehead down the nape of his long neck, and round his small, delicate ears. His features were thin, but well-chiselled, his eyes dark and beautifully shaped. I had heard him called handsome; to me his appearance was singularly repulsive, and never more so than when I saw him upon the wreck, crouching at his wife's side as though he relied upon her for strength and protection. He was cowed into abject terror by the thought of death.

The woman, his wife, was apparently unmoved, either by the danger or by her husband's fright. She was entirely occupied with her baby-girl, who had been ailing for the last few days. She was a handsome woman, with straight, silky, black hair, large, mournful, dark eyes, and pale, finely-cut features. She looked about thirty; a little older than her husband, whose age did not, I should think, exceed seven-and-twenty years. She was taller than he, with the grace and dignity of a duchess; and my pity had often been excited when I saw her serving him patiently, submissively, while he jeered at her for slowness, and chided her for stupidity. It was said that he struck and ill-treated her in private, but he did not exhibit any such brutality in the presence of the other passengers.

The child was a beautiful little thing with a fair skin,

soft little curls of golden hair, and mournful eyes like those of its mother. Madame Jacobi, as we generally called her, had consulted me about its health more than once. I did not think it would survive the perils of infancy, but could not bear to tell her so. The child was her only comfort in life.

Crosbie and one of the men were engaged in lashing together a few planks with which they hoped to be able to construct and launch a raft, although there was little enough time in which to carry out their intention. I assisted them to the best of my ability, but I had bruised my right arm and side so severely that I was of very little use.

Suddenly, the child, whom I still held by the hand, uttered a cry of delight. The fog was rising, the wind had changed, and the long rays of sunshine began to tremble upon the waters. The grey waves assumed lovely, changeful tints of opaline blue and green; the white foam upon their tops sparkled in the morning light. Great wreaths of mist were lifted and blown about by the fresh breeze; in a very short time it would curl itself away completely into cloudland. But where should we be then?

To the west we saw a level line of sandy beach. We had drifted farther westward in the night than we knew. If we had had a boat we could have made land easily. It was almost within swimming distance.

We looked round for help. There were some fishing smacks visible—not near enough to be of use. It seemed doubly terrible to go down into the sea and drown with land in sight. Crosbie turned his back to the coast, and stared at the sunrise with a frown upon his face. We were thinking the same thought.

"Land! land!" cried the little fellow beside me, waving his arms towards the shore. "Look at the land. We shall soon be there, shall we not?"

Nobody replied. Crosbie uttered a short, stifled groan. Madame Jacobi raised her eyes from her child's face, looked steadily for a moment into mine, then dropped them upon her child again. She was a brave woman.

But Constantine Jacobi sprang from his crouching attitude with a yell of triumph, stretching out his arms also towards the shore.

"Land! land! I shall be saved!" he shouted. "I shall not die here like a rat in a hole. I can swim. I can save myself. I shall not die."

As he spoke he adjusted a life-buoy round his waist with eager, trembling fingers. He stood with his head bent a little forward, his hungry eyes fixed upon the solid land beyond. His face was full of greedy animal desire of life, which left no room for feelings of love or pity for anybody but himself. He did not even glance towards his wife and child.

"You can't swim that distance," said Crosbie, roughly.

"I can, I can," he said, his teeth chattering. "I was always a good swimmer—at Plymouth—I am very strong; I have this life-buoy. Let me pass."

"Why, good heavens! man," I cried, "you don't mean to leave your wife behind?"

He cast a look of rage upon me, and tried to force me out of his way. But I would not let him pass without remonstrance.

"Are you going to desert both wife and child?" I said. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"Let me go!" he said, violently. "Look after them yourself, if you're so anxious about them. They may go to the devil for me! Good heavens! the tide is turning! Do you want to kill me?"

Madame Jacobi then raised her head and addressed me in her slightly formal, foreign way.

"Sir, you do not understand my husband. He will tell me what he means to do. Stay one moment—Constantine."

He was on the point of dashing past, and so cutting short a conversation which threatened to delay his escape from the sinking ship, but her tone of quiet command restrained him. Unwillingly he turned to her and listened, his fingers twisting with impatience. The man cared for nothing but his own safety.

Meanwhile I began to doubt whether the vessel was likely to sink at all. It was a wreck, half-submerged no

doubt; but it did not seem to me either to be going to pieces or filling any longer with water. However, I was young, inexperienced, and a trifle more diffident in expressing an opinion than I should be now; so for the moment I held my tongue. Crosbie and I withdrew a few paces and busied ourselves with our former occupation. According to Crosbie's opinion we had about five minutes to spare—perhaps not that. "Had the sea been rough," he said, "we should have gone to pieces long ago. We shall have time to row to shore if that fellow will only wait."

We were still within earshot of Madame Jacobi's conversation with her husband. To my surprise she spoke English. She showed him the little white face upon her bosom before opening her lips.

"Don't think of saving me," she said. "God knows I am not sorry to meet my death. But here is the child—your child and mine—try to save her. As you yourself hope for mercy at the Day of Judgment, have mercy upon her."

It was a strange appeal, but one not without effect. Great beads of perspiration stood upon the man's yellow, clammy brow, as he listened to her words.

She rose from her seat and held the baby towards him. For almost the first time, she showed symptoms of agitation. Her bosom rose and fell; her face worked; her eyes sparkled through a mist of tears.

"For God's sake," she said, "take the child—and leave me!"

With a savage oath, a fierce gesture of the hand, he thrust her away. The ship gave a slight lurch; he rushed to its side and plunged into the water, now lapping over the rent planks of the deck. He did not look back, did not utter a single word that indicated remorse or hesitation, but struck out to the land with the bold, swift motion of limb which at once marked him as a splendid swimmer.

"Brute!" said Crosbie. "The ship's well rid of you."

A faint cry burst from the deserted wife's pale lips. She sank down upon the tangled mass of rigging that had

formed her seat, put her hand over her eyes, and turned away her face.

"Doctor," said Crosbie, in my ear, "do you know that I don't believe we're sinking, after all?"

"I've thought that for the last ten minutes," I said.

"Good Lord!" was Crosbie's exclamation, "why didn't you say so?"

"I was not sure. And it is just as well that that scoundrel should relieve us of his presence. He might have stayed if he had thought we were tolerably safe here. But, if I'd been certain, of course I should have mentioned it."

"Well, you're a cool hand," said Crosbie. But we did not immediately impart our opinion to Madame Jacobi. We wanted to be sure of our facts before we did so. The tide was running in, and we were drifting with it. For some time we saw the dark spot, which we knew to be Constantine Jacobi's head, upon the waves. It disappeared at last, suddenly and entirely. Whether the distance hid it, or whether it had finally sunk beneath the water, we could not tell. Crosbie thought the latter.

"Poor devil's dead," he said in an undertone.

"Don't believe it," I answered, with equal curtness. "He was born to be hanged, not drowned."

There was a pause. Crosbie turned to look at the half-dozen men or boys who still remained on board. Two lay face downwards in a state of utter intoxication. One was singing a drunken song. One sat with his head bowed forward upon his knees, asleep or drunk; another lay on his back, staring vacantly at the sky. The sixth, a boy of seventeen, was the only one perfectly sober; and he was nearly frightened out of his wits. With his help Crosbie and I managed to hoist a flag made of handkerchiefs tied to a spar; for we were drifting inland, and hoped to attract the attention of the fishermen whose smacks we could distinguish in the distance. If Jacobi had landed he would surely give intelligence of our plight, and send assistance; but we could not be certain that his strength had not given way before reaching shallow water. I need not describe how anxiously we watched the white sails that came up over the blue edge of the horizon, how

tremblingly we followed their course with our strained and aching eyes, how bitter was our disappointment when again and again they vanished into the distant haze.

"If we get no help before the turn of the tide," said Crosbie, in a low voice, "we shall drift out to sea, and then—God help us!"

All we could do was to concentrate our energies upon the making of the raft. I consulted with Crosbie as to whether either of us should make the attempt to swim to shore, as Jacobi had done, but he, curiously enough, was no swimmer, and the injury to my arm rendered me incapable of the exertion. Two of the men were good swimmers, but they were drunk.

"Another sail!" said Crosbie at length.

We watched; we waited. Yes, it was coming in our direction; we had still a chance. I left Crosbie on the look-out, while I tried to awaken the sailors from their drunken stupor. When I had partially succeeded in doing this, I heard him call me in a quick, agitated voice.

"Doctor, doctor! come here."

"What is it?"

His eyes were fixed upon the sea; he spoke in a hoarse, troubled voice. "Fate's against us, doctor," he said. "The tide's running out; the wind has changed, and a squall is coming on. We have lost our chance. No raft will save us now!"

CHAPTER II

THE RESCUE

DRENCHED with salt spray and driving rain, chilled to the very bone by the cold, wet wind, tossing helplessly up and down with the creaking wreck—to the higher portion of which we had all, with some difficulty, clambered up—death staring us in the face; in this manner the dreary hours passed by. Land was out of sight; the sea, a heaving, grey mass, flecked ominously here and there

with foam, indistinguishable from the grey haze and watery sky that overhung it; while we, poor wretches, clinging together for dear life, were momentarily in a state of dread lest the weaker ones among us should relax their hold and be swept away by some great hungry wave before the stronger ones could intervene to rescue them. The two women and the children were, of course, the chief objects of our solicitude, as they seemed the least able to endure bodily suffering and privation. The women behaved with courage which put ours to shame.

Of Madame Jacobi I can only say that her conduct was marked by a stoical endurance which verged on heroism. Her husband had deserted her, and a sickly baby lay upon her bosom. But she never uttered a word of complaint or grief.

Then the night fell. Twelve mortal hours of darkness, fear, and misery. I cannot dwell upon that part of my story. The women were in the safest position that we could give them, as we had tied them to the one remaining broken mast, with ourselves grouped round so as to form a bulwark between them and the waves. I did not fear that they would be washed off the vessel, but I dreaded the effects of cold and privation, especially upon the two children. The poor baby had not moved or cried for several hours, and its tiny waxen hand—which I touched, seemingly by accident, really by design—was icy cold. Its face was hidden beneath its mother's cloak; she held it close to her, and would neither look at me nor speak.

The daylight looked pale and cold to our despairing eyes. Hunger and thirst now began to make themselves felt as distinct miseries, for we had lost all our provisions, save one half-emptied bag of biscuits which were soaked through and through with salt water. The sea was calm and the wind had dropped, but we could not see far because of the haze and the blinding rain.

We spent some time in a half-stupefied condition, worn out with cold and exhaustion, hopeless of any change save that of death.

And when we had given up hope a change came.

All at once a ship's masts loomed before us, magnified by the mist into a strange and awful shape; all at once the

shout of men's voices rang in our deaf ears like the summons from another world. To that first shout I believe we were too dazed to answer. To the second we raised our voices in reply, but the sound we made was hoarse and feeble, so that it must have sounded more like a wail than a shout in the ears of those who listened.

Presently we heard the splash of oars, the sound of men's voices, the tread of feet upon our rotten planks; we grasped strong hands, we saw pitying faces, and knew that we were saved. Then all of us—except Madame Jacobi—said, "Thank God!" She only was silent; still indifferent, still apparently unmoved.

We had been picked up by a fishing sloop, which belonged to a village a few miles south of the bay where Jacobi had made his rash attempt to swim ashore. The fishermen were eager to help us, and very pitiful towards the weaker ones of our party. They took us all on board, and landed us as speedily as possible. We found food, shelter, and kindly faces awaiting us at the little village of Fairhaven, whither we were conducted.

Miss Fearon's strength gave way when we found ourselves in safety. For some hours she suffered severely from the excitement and exposure through which she had passed. She was carefully tended by one of the fishermen's wives, and in a few days seemed likely to do well. I telegraphed to her friends from the nearest town as soon as she could give me her address. They speedily appeared upon the scene, and bore her off to New York, where she was married a month later. The men recovered their strength more quickly, and dispersed to find employment in various ways. Crosbie left me with a warm shake of the hand and a hope that we should not lose sight of each other. He took charge of the little boy, and tried—fruitlessly, I believe—to discover any relations or friends belonging to him, finally adopted him, and brought him up as his own son. But none of these people have I ever met again.

Still I lingered at Fairhaven. The place held one great attraction for me. I could not go without knowing what would become of Madame Jacobi.

When she was lifted on board the sloop she resisted all

efforts made to take the baby from her arms. We thought it advisable not to press her on the subject until we arrived at Fairhaven. I knew—we all knew—that the poor little thing was dead ; but whether she was aware of it we could not tell. She seemed to be half-insensible when we landed, and I advised the woman to whose house she was taken to undress her at once and put her into a warm bed. I, myself, gladly exchanged my sodden garments for the blue jersey and wide trousers of a fisherman, and was standing before a blazing fire, smoking a pipe and drinking hot brandy and water, when the summons that I had expected came. I could not make up my mind to go to bed and sleep off my fatigue until I knew whether Madame Jacobi or Miss Fearon stood in need of medical advice, for I had ascertained that no doctor lived within any reasonable distance of Fairhaven. The little boy and the men were quite as well as one could expect, and were—the men at least—making enormous meals of salt fish, brown bread, bacon and whisky, amidst an admiring crowd of native inhabitants. But for Madame Jacobi I thought I had reason to fear.

The fisherman's wife came to the door of the room where I was standing in company with her husband and James Crosbie, and addressed us in a troubled voice.

"Did I hear you say there was a doctor here?" she asked, looking from me to Crosbie, in evident doubt.

"I'm your man," said I, briskly. "What is it?"

"The lady, sir," she answered. "You told me to take the baby away from her and get her to bed, but she won't let me touch it. I do believe, sir"—lowering her words—"that the poor little thing is dead."

"My good soul, how could you expect it to live through all that exposure?" I said. "I told you I was nearly sure it was dead. Of course it must be taken away from the lady. I'll come and speak to her. Is she here?"

I followed her into the little room whither Madame Jacobi had been carried. The poor woman was lying upon a truckle-bed. Her wet clothes still clung around her, and the baby was pressed close to her bosom. Her face was deadly white, her eyes were fixed in a vacant and unmeaning stare upon the whitewashed wall.

"Well, Madame Jacobi," I said, cheerfully, "had you not better let Mrs. Ericson help you with your wet clothes? Let me take baby, and she will get you into bed."

I made my words as homely and commonplace as usual, with the view of rousing her from her state of apathy; but they seemed to produce no effect.

"Come," I said, gently laying my hand upon the child's cold limbs, "won't you give her to me for a moment?"

Her eyes quitted the whitewashed wall and fixed themselves upon my face. But she did not loose her hold. Only her bloodless lips and swollen tongue strove hard to form the sentence she wished to speak. Finally these words were uttered in a hoarse, scarcely intelligible voice. They were not words I expected to hear her say.

"I know," she said at last, "I know—that—baby—is—dead."

And then the light of a fierce agony leaped up into her eyes. She started into a sitting posture, still clasping the baby to her breast, and uttered a shrill, sharp cry—or rather scream of pain; then sank back insensible. At last we could withdraw the child's cold form from her relaxing clasp, and lay it out of sight before she woke to the bitter consciousness of loss.

We had hard work to restore her from her swoon. It was not like an ordinary fainting fit. Her teeth clenched, her eyes half-closed, her limbs rigid, she lay for hours without motion or warmth, and with almost every appearance of death. Many persons thought that she was either dead or dying. I should have been thankful on her behalf if I could have thought so too. But she passed from insensibility to a state of wild delirium, and then to great prostration of strength.

She was still seriously ill when we buried the child in a desolate little graveyard on a bleak hillside. She asked no question about it until she was much better. Then Mrs. Ericson told her all she knew, and was amazed to find that she listened quietly, and only turned her face to the wall in silence when the tale was told.

In three weeks all the members of the rescue party, except herself and me, had quitted the island. Why

did I stay? Well, partly because there was no doctor in the neighbourhood to whom I could trust a case which was (simply from a medical point of view) so interesting to me, partly because I could not endure the thought of leaving my patient alone, penniless and unbefriended. My friends were sending me letters daily to summon me to the appointment which I had accepted in Philadelphia; I knew I was wasting my time; but I could not make up my mind to go. From which hesitation you will infer that I was much interested in Madame Jacobi.

I was walking up and down in front of the fishermen's huts one morning, when Mrs. Ericson summoned me to her door.

"If you please, sir, the lady wants to see you," she began. "She is coming out."

"Coming out, is she? Well, perhaps the fresh air will do her good. Is she better this morning?"

"I don't think she will be better as long as she stays here, sir," said Mrs. Ericson. "Now, if you, sir, being a relation, could get her right away——"

"I am no relation. I have no authority over her," I said, with some asperity. "Did you think I was her brother?"

"Some of the people thought that—that you were her husband, sir," said Mrs. Ericson, playing with her apron-string, and evidently growing nervous. "We said at first that you must be man and wife."

"Now, look here, Mrs. Ericson," I said, facing round upon her with all the sternness that I could assume at a moment's notice, for, even if I was fool enough to turn hot and cold by turns when I heard her words, I had sufficient sense to see that nothing could be so painful to Madame Jacobi as gossip concerning her relations with me; "you must know by this time that Madame Jacobi's husband was the man who tried to swim ashore before we left the wreck. Her child is dead and buried, but her husband is alive at this moment for aught I know to the contrary. I think you do not show your usual consideration for her feelings by speaking about her in this way. I expected more kindness from you. Of course you have given her attention—for which you will be

remunerated—but I expected more than the services for which you can be paid.”

I knew that my words would hurt her; they were meant to do so. Her honest face was aflame with indignation as she answered that she did not want remuneration; she wanted to show the lady all the kindness that lay in her power.

“Very well. I don’t say that you have not been kind. But don’t spoil your kindness by speculating about private affairs that are not your business. And remember that Madame Jacobi’s husband may come for her any day, and that if he doesn’t she will go and meet him.”

Mrs. Ericsen’s apron was at her eyes by this time, and I was turning away with some roughness of manner when I came face to face with Madame Jacobi. She was standing behind us listening, with a slight, strange smile upon her lips.

“You think he may come—any day?” she said softly
“I thank you, sir.”

I had not seen her out of doors or fully dressed since the beginning of her illness, and I was suddenly impressed with the wonderful change in her appearance. Her black dress hung loosely upon her wasted figure, her cheeks and temples had sunk into hollows, the veins showed in her heavy eyelids and upon her pale forehead. Her features were pinched and bloodless; her hair was streaked with grey. Only her eyes retained their wonderful beauty, and glittered in the grey pallor of her features like jewels set in a face of stone. She had stepped out of the house bare-headed, with a shawl wrapped loosely round her shoulders, and she did not appear to feel the cold, although the sea-breeze blew fresh and keen.

“It is too cold for you,” I said, after staring at her for a moment in startled silence. “You had better go indoors.”

“No,” she answered, with equal abruptness, “I mean to stay here. I have rested too long already. What was it that you were saying? That my husband would come back?”

“I trust to Heaven not,” were the rash words that broke from me against my will. Then, ashamed of my-

self, I wheeled round to the sea, with my shoulder turned to her and my hands thrust deep down into my pockets. I was angry with the world, with Madame Jacobi, with myself. She looked at me steadily with the same strange smile upon her face.

"You would rather he did not come back, but you think he will! Tell me why?"

"I am not sure—I can't tell. I only wanted to silence that woman's tongue."

"What was she saying?"

"Nothing that need interest you."

"Won't you tell me what she was saying?" she persisted, laying one hand upon my arm. "Were they wondering about—my husband?"

I nodded.

"They thought it strange I should be here without him—alone?"

"Not alone," I said, vehemently. "I am here."

"Yes; Mrs. Ericson told me you were thought to be my brother."

"No—your husband," I abruptly corrected her.

What she saw in my face, still turned to the tumultuous sea, I cannot tell. She withdrew her hand from my arm and moved back from me a step or two. Then she uttered in a very low tone two words that wounded me more sharply than any words I have ever heard before or since.

"Poor boy," she said. And that was all.

"I saved your life," I reminded her harshly.

"Do you think I owe you thanks for that?" she asked.

I could not answer that bitter question. My own heart was too sore. For a little time we stood silent, and then she spoke.

"Tell me why you think my husband lives."

"He landed below Sand Point, five miles off. The fishermen saw him."

"Was that why they came to our rescue?" she asked quickly.

"Good heavens—no."

"You mean—that he did not—tell them—about the wreck?"

"Oh, yes, he did," I answered, moved to anger by her persistence. "Am I to tell you the whole truth? He said that he was the only man left alive. The people pitied him because he said he had seen his wife and child drowned before his eyes. He cried, and they gave him food and clothes. Then he started off to the other side of the island, where he took passage in a steamer just starting for the States. He seemed to have some money."

"Oh, yes," she said, quietly, "he had plenty of money. It was secured in a belt next his skin."

I looked at her in amaze. Was she really stolid and indifferent? She added, after a pause, "It was my money."

I used some violent expletive, for which she rebuked me.

"Don't use those words. They do no good. And—you do not think I shall let him go unpunished?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I will tell you presently. Mrs. Ericksen said you would show me the place where you left—her—my baby. Will you do so now?"

We walked to the grave in silence. Then she turned to me gently.

"Will you leave me here for half-an-hour? And will you promise not to look back—not to watch me? I want to be quite alone."

I promised, rather against my will, and so left her. Before I had gone five yards I heard a sound which smote me to the heart. She was sobbing, not very loudly, but passionately, miserably, as if she could contain her grief no longer. I stopped, strongly tempted to look back; but, after a struggle, I kept my word.

When I returned in half-an-hour she was sitting beside the grave with her hands crossed upon her knees. Her face bore the traces of tears; there was a red spot of colour just over each cheek-bone; the rest was perfectly white. But her eyes were dry, her voice was composed as she invited me to draw near. The little grave was very smooth and green; flowers had been planted round it; a wooden cross, engraved with a name and date, stood at its head.

"You did this?" she said, looking at the flowers and the cross.

"I thought you would like it," I answered.

"You are very kind." She stopped, looked at the cross, then went on, hurriedly: "So kind that I will not deceive you any longer. I will tell you the truth about myself and my husband."

"Madame Jacobi," I said, "I will listen gladly to all you say about yourself, but I do not particularly wish to hear anything concerning your husband."

She went on unheeding.

"First, I must tell you that the name is wrong," she said, pointing to the cross. "It should have been 'Teresa Vallor,' not 'Jacobi.' My husband's name is Constantine Vallor. Now, do you understand?"

"Vallor? Vallor?—not the man—who——"

"The man who stabbed a comrade to the heart in the streets of Marseilles three months ago. I see you remember the case. There were some medical details that would interest you. He used a poisoned knife. Well, he escaped from prison—it matters not how—and joined me in England. Captain Banks was an old acquaintance of my husband's, and promised to take us safely to America. I had money. I paid him a large sum for our passage. Constantine Vallor had possession of a portion of the rest—not all of it; I have plenty for my own needs. I had inherited a fortune from my father; he was the proprietor of a gaming-house in Paris some years ago. He was a Spaniard by birth; my mother was an Englishwoman. Do you know Charnwood, in Hertfordshire? She came from there; her name was Elizabeth Darenth. She died of a broken heart, and she said that I should die so, too. But I do not think I shall."

"No," I said grimly, "surely you need not break your heart over a villain!"

Her eyes sought mine. She began to answer with a gentle, almost smiling, coldness which gradually changed and darkened into sombre passion. "No," she said, "I should like to break his first. I mean to make him grovel at my feet and beg for the mercy that I will not

give. I mean to make him curse the day when he was born." Her eyes suddenly flashed fire; her cheeks turned white. "He might have saved my child. Do you think I am likely to pardon him for his share in her death? Oh, my baby, my baby!" She bent down her head upon the little grave, embraced it with her arms, and kissed it. "My little Teresa!" she moaned. "Shall I ever see thee again, my beautiful one, my flower?"

I had no right to look upon her sacred mother's grief. I walked away and stood at some little distance from her. But presently she called me back. She had regained her calmness, but I had not.

"Answer me a question about yourself," she said. "Don't take any notice of what I have said. I want you to tell me what you are going to do?"

"My affairs can wait," I said.

"I think not. You are—how old? Twenty-four?"

"Twenty-five."

"With all your life before you. You told me you had accepted an appointment at Philadelphia. Why are you not there?"

"An unfair question," I said. "You know why I am not there. Because I want to be of use to you. I care to be here more than anywhere else in the world at this moment. And I have lost my appointment."

"I am sorry for that," she said. "You are good and kind, but you are very young and inexperienced. I must send you away from the island."

"You cannot. I shall stay as long as you do."

"Then I must go this afternoon. I will not see you again. One of us must take the boat that starts this afternoon. But I should like to stay here a little longer."

"So you mean that you will not let me help you? I can be of no further use to you, and you drive me from you as though I were a troublesome dog? You mean that my presence annoys you?"

"Yes," she said firmly. "That is what I mean."

"In that case," I said, "I will relieve you of it at once."

I tried to start away, but she laid her hand upon one of mine, and held it as she spoke. "I am not so ungrateful as I seem. You have been kind, noble, generous to me,

without measure ; be more kind and generous still. Let me remember you as the one good man whom I have ever known. Go back to your work ; live your own life ; you will have other claims and other interests soon. Some day you will thank me that I sent you from me. Your life is bright and untarnished ; it must not be dimmed by contact with mine. I have my own work to do."

"Let me help you in it," I cried. "Let me be your friend, at any rate. Don't I wish to bring that man to justice as much as you?"

She shook her head. "I want no help," she said.

"Why did you ever marry him?"

"I loved him once," she answered, slowly. "I sheltered him—I toiled for him—I bore shame, and pain, and misery for him ; he hated me in return. I asked him to save my child's life. He refused. Now I shall spare him no longer. Some day he will pay the penalty of his crimes ; the work of bringing him to justice must be mine—mine—mine alone. Some day when he thinks he is happy, and rich, and prosperous, I shall stand forward in the world's sight and point to him, and——"

She stopped abruptly. "And what?" I asked.

"When that day comes," she said, deliberately, "if you are alive you will be sure to hear. Now leave me."

Once again I ventured to plead that I might help her. My words were of no avail. And so I yielded. "But if I go now you will write to me?" I said at last.

She looked at me, meditated a moment, then answered, "Yes."

"If you are in want of help, you will let me know?"

"Yes."

"I shall meet you in Philadelphia—or elsewhere?"

Still she answered with that soft monotonous, "Yes."

"Then we part only for a little time?" I said, affecting a hopefulness I did not feel.

"Only for a little time," she answered. She withdrew her hand from mine, smiled strangely, and pointed to a vessel at anchor in the bay. "You will be late. Make haste. Farewell."

I left her. When I looked back I saw her, as I have

since seen her many a time in dreams, on the bleak hillside, in a flood of garish sunshine, sitting white and silent beside her baby's grave, her thin shawl fluttering in the wind.

She never wrote to me. When Christmas came round she let me hear, by means of a few lines from a firm of lawyers in New York, that she was alive and well. I questioned those lawyers in vain; either they could not, or they would not, tell me more.

Seven years had passed before we met again.

END OF PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I

THE DARENTHS OF CHARNWOOD

THE sun was pouring a flood of radiance through the latticed windows of an old-fashioned farmhouse kitchen in Hertfordshire. A square, solid-looking arm-chair, black with age, cushioned with scarlet, was drawn up to the hearth; it was empty, but a newspaper thrown over the arm, and a long pipe lying across the bars of the brass fender beside it, told of recent occupancy. At present a great grey cat and two kittens had established themselves upon the cushion, and awaited the return of their master with purring complacency.

The rest of the furniture was severely plain. But sombre as, on the whole, were the tints of that smoke-dimmed, old-fashioned kitchen, its rich gloom resembled, in some fanciful eyes, the tarnished setting of a priceless gem, and to those same eyes that gem was found in the beautiful face and form of Farmer Darenth's only daughter. Certainly Joan Darenth, as she stood beside the window in the full light of the setting sun, lost nothing by contrast with the surroundings; rather they enhanced, and threw into strong relief, the beauty of her peach-like bloom and nobly moulded figure.

She was tall, finely developed, full of humour and exuberant health, her head was finely poised upon her stately neck and strong, well-proportioned shoulders, and laden with dark hair, slightly waving but smooth as satin, which reached her knees when not coiled into a thick knot at the back of her shapely head. Her forehead was broad, her eyebrows almost straight, her eyes magnificent, very grave and direct in expression, beautifully shaped, and so varying in colour that it was hard to decide whether they should be called brown, hazel, or grey. Her mouth was not a small one, but it was perfectly formed;

it was a face which might have been called lovely because of its colouring merely, even without the higher gifts of finely moulded feature and sweet gravity of expression which had been vouchsafed to it. Her complexion was of that creamy-brown which never tans. Her gestures, her attitudes, were graceful and unconstrained, but never without a certain dignity and even a kind of proud reserve, which was apt to hold persons at a distance until they had seen her melted to sudden softness by the kiss of a child, or moved to tears of pity by some tale of woe. Her voice was peculiarly gentle, and yet it was said that she ruled her father's household with a rod of iron. It was perhaps also a curious fact that, in spite of her beauty, every woman in the countryside was Joan Darenth's friend, and that men were generally a little afraid of her.

Her sleeves were rolled up above her elbows, thus displaying white, strong arms, the muscles well developed beneath the smooth, firm skin. Her hands, fine-shaped, long-fingered, but large, were busy in an earthenware pan, where she was mixing the materials for a hot cake which her father liked to eat at his supper. Over her cotton dress, yellowish-brown in colour, she wore a white apron and bib. Silently, deftly she worked away, seldom raising her eyes from her occupation. Once the unclosing of a gate, the sound of a voice in the yard, attracted her attention. She paused for a moment, looked out, then resumed her work, with the faintest possible increase of colour in her cheek and a close setting of her lips together. But when the new-comer appeared before her at the window she was able to smile him a welcome with perfect indifference and unconcern.

"Good evening, Miss Darenth."

Joan responded suitably, "Good evening, sir."

"I came to speak to your father about a horse, but I fear he is not at home. May I wait for him?"

"I will open the parlour for you, sir, if you will kindly wait a minute. I must put my father's cake into the oven and wash my hands; then I'll get the key."

So far, perfect propriety of demeanour had been maintained on both sides; she had been humble, he polite; both rather frigid, as if in uncongenial company. Sud-

denly the gentleman's face changed. He put his arms on the window-sill, leaned forward, and laughed a little softly.

"Come, Joan," he said, "how long is this to last? You know very well that I did not walk here simply to sit in the parlour and talk about the roan. Aren't you going to look at me?"

She looked at him without the slightest relaxation of her gravity, but her eyes softened. Perhaps, like many other people, she found it difficult to be hard upon Geoffrey Vanborough, when his pleasant face was straight before her.

Captain Vanborough was reputed to be the most popular man in his regiment, and the most good-natured fellow in the world. He was at this time over thirty years of age, six feet four inches in height, broad-shouldered and muscular. His handsome features were grave, somewhat impassive in repose, but the smile that gave them the animation they lacked was singularly sweet, and his brown eyes were always winning. His thick brown hair and long moustache made him look older than he was, and this fact, together with his very grave and sometimes icily courteous manner, caused him to appear rather formidable to people at first sight. But his gentle good nature, his incapacity for saying "No" to a request, his dislike of wounding any person's feelings, procured him much affection amongst his acquaintances and friends. He was sometimes called weak, indolent, extravagant, and perhaps he was; but through all phases of weakness, indolence, and extravagance, he remained an eminently lovable man, who never willingly caused pain to any human creature.

So when he said, "Aren't you going to look at me?" in his gentlest voice, Joan raised her eyes to his, and her face softened.

"It's no use, Captain Vanborough," she said, resolutely. "Why should I look at you? You ought to go away and never come near me again."

"I have been away," said Geoffrey. "I came from Aldershot this afternoon, and I have to be back to-morrow morning."

"All that way!" she exclaimed, in rather a shocked tone. "For so short a time?"

"If you want me to stay longer, Joan, I will."

"I don't mean that. I mean the expense," she said, soberly.

"I think I can afford my fare to Charnwood and back. I came on business."

"Yes," she said, as she carried away her paste-board and rolling-pin. "Father will be in directly. He wants to see you about the roan, I know."

Then she busied herself in the back kitchen, and was a very long time in arranging her affairs there and in washing her hands. Geoffrey waited at the window with his arm upon the sill.

"I had other business," he said, when at last she returned. "I came to see you, and I think you ought to treat me well, Joan. Don't you? Suppose you come out with me and take a stroll in the wood."

Joan uttered a scornful little laugh. "I've other things to do," she said. And down she went on her knees before the fire in order to sweep up the ashes more comfortably.

"Treat me fairly, Joan, if you won't treat me well," said the persistent voice at the window. "In common justice you ought to listen to me, when I have come all this way for your sake." This appeal produced some effect upon Geoffrey's listener; her hands moved more slowly, and she did not immediately reply. Geoffrey waited, knowing the temper of the woman with whom he had to deal. If once her sense of justice was enlisted on his side he was safe of a hearing.

But she turned round presently with a look of conviction in her face. "Am I fairly treated?" she said. "Why do you come after me like this, when I told you I would have nothing to say to you? How did we part last time?"

"On very bad terms," said Geoffrey, coolly. "We agreed to call each other Miss Darenth and Captain Vanborough for the rest of our natural lives, if I remember aright. Absurd, you know."

"I daresay it is absurd that you should call me Miss Darenth."

"Joan, don't you think you are very hard on me?"

"If I am," she said, sadly, "I am far harder on myself." And two tears stood in her beautiful eyes and startled Geoffrey into action. He placed his hands on the low window sill and sprang over it. In another second he was at Joan's side, and was trying to put his arm round her waist. But she repulsed him, not angrily, but with decision.

"You don't understand. It isn't that I think it hard that I should have to send you away. It's right that I should do that. But it is hard that you should never believe what I say—that I should have to tell you so many times—that you should have so little respect for me."

And then the drops fell, and her stately throat quivered.

"I respect you more than anybody in the world," said Geoffrey, still with the ring of levity which Joan found so hard to bear in his voice, though with a kindly look in his handsome eyes, "but I cannot promise to testify my respect by never speaking to you again. Joan——"

He could not finish the sentence. At that moment old Farmer Darenth entered, followed by his second son, Luke, and Joan moved hastily from his side. While she took refuge in the back kitchen, Captain Vanborough entered into conversation with the farmer. Reuben Darenth was a shrewd man—not always a pleasant one—but he had a great liking for Geoffrey Vanborough in particular, and a sort of feudal reverence for the whole family of Vanboroughs in general, and was exceedingly anxious to oblige them in every possible way. Luke's attitude was a little antagonistic to their visitor. He suspected, in some dim way, that Geoffrey's presence was displeasing to Joan, and, as he adored his sister, Geoffrey's presence was likewise displeasing to him. He was a tall, handsome man, rather like her in feature, but ruddier, heavier, and very stolid in expression. The three walked out to look at the horse of which Captain Vanborough had spoken, and when, after half an hour's absence, they returned, a white cloth was spread upon the table, and Joan was busily

engaged, with the aid of a maid-servant, in setting out plates and dishes upon it for the evening meal.

Supper at the Darenths' farm was always a mingled pain and pleasure to Geoffrey. He liked to be in Joan's company, but he did not like her to wait upon him in the way she did. Service from Joan might in itself be sweet, but it was not sweet when offered in compliance with some conventional rule of society, instead of being the offspring of her care and love for him. And she said, "Sir," and was punctiliously respectful. He found it unbearable at last, and refused to eat or drink anything more. Reuben Darenth thought the young master must be ill; in a general way Geoffrey was famed for his appetite.

The elder son, Seth, was absent, and the conversational powers of Reuben and his son Luke were very limited. But Luke presently bethought himself that he had a piece of news to tell Joan, and he told it with his mouth full.

"Spence's wife's down wi' the fever, I hear them say."

Joan stopped short in her occupation of bread-cutting, and stood with her knife in the air intent upon what was to follow. Luke resumed:

"Little boy be bad with it, too. Mary Jones, she be in and out to do what she can, but she can't leave her own three for long."

"Dear, dear! that's bad news," said Joan, simply. "Mary Jones won't take her children into the Spences' house, I hope. They would catch it too, wouldn't they?"

"What fever is it?" Geoffrey asked.

"Scarlet fever they call it," Luke answered, in his heavy way, and Geoffrey looked up sharply.

"Is the house near?" he asked, with a slight change of tone, which struck Joan's ear as strange.

"Just outside the village; not very near."

Captain Vanborough paused for a moment, balanced his knife on his finger, and spoke with an uneasy look at Joan. "You must be careful about going near that part of the village."

"Why? If people are to catch it, they will, and it's no good fighting against it," said Joan, solemnly.

Captain Vanborough uttered an impatient little sound, but did not contradict her. He did not know what to say. Joan stood looking at him, knowing that he disapproved of what she had said, and tenderly anxious to remedy the matter if only she could do so.

"Here's the doctor riding into the yard," said Luke, rising from the table. "He'll be wanting broths and puddens from you, Joan, for the sick folk. They always come to Joan," he added, for Captain Vanborough's benefit, with a proudly affectionate glance at his sister.

"I must get Doctor Ambrose to talk to you," said Geoffrey, smiling at Joan. "Has he never tried to teach you what to do in fever cases? You must have illness of that kind here sometimes."

"He told Mrs. Sowerby that it was her own fault when her baby died," said Joan, in a low voice. "And she was so heart-broken about it that—she—rather set me against listening to him. Don't you think it was godless to say that it was her fault that the baby was taken away?"

"Whether it was godless or not," said Geoffrey, with an amused smile in his eyes, "he was probably talking commonsense." Whereat Joan looked thoughtful, and even shocked. "Come out and speak to him. I always like to meet Doctor Ambrose."

Joan followed meekly. Luke was already standing beside the doctor's horse, listening to some account of an accident which had happened in the neighbourhood. But at the sound of Geoffrey's voice Doctor Ambrose turned round sharply.

"Whew? You again? What are you doing down here?" was his first salutation. "Your father thinks you're at Aldershot."

He was a little, white-haired man, with a red nose and inquisitive eyes. He was the son of the village schoolmaster, and had gained his present position by means of his own cleverness and the help of friends. He was the favourite medical man for miles round with two very different classes of society—with the poor, because he

made himself at home with them ; with a large section of the local aristocracy, because they liked a doctor whom they need not treat as a gentleman. After forty years of practice he was more intimately acquainted with the private affairs of half the families in the county than any other man, except, perhaps, a certain lawyer who lived in the chief county town. He prided himself upon this knowledge, and on the familiarity with which he was privileged to treat so many of the younger members of the families he attended, "on the ground," he said, "that he was decidedly their earliest friend." For this reason he was peculiarly interested in Geoffrey Vanborough, of whom he knew less than he would have liked to know.

"Have you seen my father lately ?" Geoffrey asked, with cold unconcern.

"Saw him this morning. Said you were going to visit your brother Gilbert to-day."

"No—to-morrow. I wanted to look at a horse Darenth is keeping for me."

The doctor gave him a sharp glance.

"Did you ? I hope it's satisfactory," he said. "Joan, you're looking pale, I shall have to prescribe for you. And, by-the-bye, I want you to send some milk to the Spences every morning for a bit. Can you spare it ?"

"Of course we can, sir." Joan looked up, her face alight. "What else can I do for them ?"

"Why, keep out of their way," said the old doctor. "That's the wisest thing you can do for them. I've had to turn half the women of the village out of the house this afternoon. They came with their babies in their arms, as they always do when there's illness about, to gossip and block up doorways and effectually prevent my patients from getting well—to say nothing of running a risk for themselves and their children. Mrs. Jones has been in and out several times, but she'll have to stay at home now ; one of her own children's sickening."

"Oh !" said Joan, pitifully.

"So do you keep out of the way of harm. You've had scarlet fever yourself, I know, but you had better not run any unnecessary risk," said the doctor, shaking his bridle as if to move off.

"Stay a minute," Geoffrey interposed. "I wish you would explain what the risk of infection really is, doctor; my friends here think it needless to take any precautions about it."

"Oh, I know her views," said Doctor Ambrose, nodding towards Joan. "She always keeps me at arm's length. Who's converted her? You?"

He did not wait for an answer, but launched at once into a vehement harangue upon the proper treatment of fever cases and the prevention of the spread of infection. Joan listened with profound attention, her hands clasped, her serious face lifted towards the doctor. Geoffrey leaned idly against the fence and looked at her. Doctor Ambrose, erect upon his white horse, glanced from one to the other as he spoke, and drew a shrewd conclusion from their respective attitudes.

"That's all, at present," he said, abruptly. "Now, don't talk any more nonsense about illness and death being inevitable. Good-evening, Geoffrey. Send up the milk, Joan, and don't let me find you nursing Mrs. Spence's baby, as I did when they had diphtheria. Horribly unhealthy these low-lying villages are." And Doctor Ambrose urged his white horse down the lane.

But when he was gone Joan roused herself from the reverie into which she had fallen, and caught sight of his departing figure. A sudden wave of colour rushed into her face; she stretched out her hands and lifted up her voice.

"Doctor! Oh, Doctor Ambrose! Oh, he is gone. Stop him, Luke, run after him and tell him to stop."

Joan ran down the lane without further words, and arrived breathless at the doctor's side.

The doctor ambled leisurely up the lane once more. Joan walked beside him, her face flushed, her eyes bright and earnest.

"What do you think she wants to do now?" he called out to them when within speaking distance. "She says she will go and nurse the Spences herself and keep other people away."

"I hope you will not allow her to do any such thing," said Geoffrey in a low tone, which betrayed annoyance

and uneasiness. Doctor Ambrose looked at him, and chuckled inwardly. "What a tale for your father to hear, young man!" he thought. But aloud he merely said :

"I shall be only too glad to get her. She's a splendid nurse—if she does what she's told. But of course it's a risk for her to run."

"I will do exactly what you tell me," said Joan, with firm directness. "I understand better now."

"Where's your father, Luke?" said Geoffrey, quietly.

"Father won't stop me," Joan answered, looking him full in the face. "Nor will you, sir. These poor people have nobody to nurse them except their neighbours, who ought not to go inside their house. I can help them, and I can keep the neighbours out—which is what everybody cannot do, though I say it. They know me."

"That they do. And they trust you," said the doctor, heartily. "Go and speak to your father, like a good girl, Joan, if you really mean what you say, and then come back to me."

"Could you not get a nurse from Hertford?" said Geoffrey, when she had gone. "I'd stand some of the expense. I don't like to see people hazarding their lives in that way."

"Bless you, Joan doesn't hazard her life," said the doctor, laughing. "With her splendid constitution she is as safe as I am, if she only obeys orders. She has had the fever, I tell you, a well-marked unmistakable case of real scarlet fever, and I don't believe she will take it again, and she's a better nurse for these village people than one from Hertford would be. They'll do what she tells 'em, and if she does what I tell her, we shall manage to prevent the fever from spreading. And between ourselves, Geoffrey, I expected to have half the village down with it."

CHAPTER II

AT THE COTTAGE

JOAN came back in a quarter of an hour with a bag in one hand and a bundle in another. Reuben Darenth followed her with a can of milk in his hand. He, at least, did not disapprove of her going. When Geoffrey dropped a word, half of astonishment, half of dissatisfaction, the old farmer shook his head rebukingly.

"Neighbours must be neighbourly," he said. "Joan's set her heart on going."

"It's the right thing to do," said Joan, with a clear, bright look upon her brown, handsome face, as if she had just seen the way out of a difficulty. "Are you going to walk up with me, Luke? You may come as far as the garden gate. Good-bye, father." And then she kissed him on both cheeks. "Martha will attend to the dairy till I come back again."

"I must be getting home," said the doctor. "Now, Joan, listen to me." He drew her aside and gave her a few short directions, to which she listened respectfully. "And don't tell them that it's God's will that they should all take the fever," he concluded. Then to Geoffrey: "Are you coming my way?"

"No," said Geoffrey. "I shall walk up the road with Luke, I think."

"With Luke and Joan? All right. Take care of yourself. Shall I tell your father I've seen you?"

"Certainly," Geoffrey answered, with the cool haughtiness which was natural to him when he was annoyed. "He will probably be very grateful to you for the information." Then he turned to Joan, and walked away from the doctor, who threw a laughing farewell behind him as the white horse trotted down the lane.

"Joan," Geoffrey seized the opportunity of saying in her ear, "You have not let me speak to you yet."

"It is too late," she answered, promptly. "You must not come near me while I am at the cottage. I shall see no one."

"For how long?"

"Six weeks, I should think."

"Joan, I don't know whether you are more cruel or more absurd."

And then Luke stepped between them. But Geoffrey found a moment in which to say, with more insistence:

"I must speak to you to-night or to-morrow morning. I shall wait."

No answer was possible.

The cottage to which they were going was situated three-quarters of a mile distant from the Darenths' farm. On ordinary occasions the house and garden presented a very quiet and secluded appearance. It would have been easy to imagine that this roadside cottage was far removed from any other human habitation. It was the loneliest dwelling-place in the village of Charnwood.

But on this especial evening, when Joan and Captain Vanborough and Luke reached the little green gate, the garden was overrun with visitors. Several children were playing in the road, a man was smoking his pipe at the gate, three women loitered on the path, and voices issued from the interior of the house.

"Are they mad?" said Geoffrey, in a low tone, as he advanced.

Joan, to whom he had spoken, looked at him for a moment, uncomprehendingly; then a new and startled light came into her eyes.

"Is it so bad as that?" she murmured slowly.

"What's wrong?" Luke asked of one of the women, as the three paused at the garden gate.

"Eh, poor soul, the little boy's just dead and the baby's been in a fit," was the answer, while other women pressed near to add their testimony to the tale.

"Mary Spence is just beginning of the fever herself, and her husband's fit to go out of his mind about the little boy."

Joan had entered the house, whither Geoffrey would

have followed her if he could have done any good and if she would have allowed him to do so. Presently she came out and stood on the door-step.

"Neighbours," she said, so clearly that her words were heard by every person present, "you would be doing a kindness if you would all go home directly."

The scene was impressed upon Geoffrey Vanborough's memory for many a long year. By this time the sun had sunk below the horizon, and though the western sky was still golden with its light, a peculiar hush, as of coming night, had settled down upon the lonely road. The cottage, shadowed by the rising ground behind it, looked dark and cheerless; the groups of visitors in the garden had been suddenly silenced at the sound of Joan's voice. Everyone waited, thinking she had more to say; but she was silent still. And then a woman began to grumble.

"We ain't doing no harm. I ain't a-going home till I know how the baby does, no more ain't any of us unless we choose."

"The baby is better," said Joan, firmly. "You can do no good to Mary Spence by stopping here, and you're only putting yourselves in danger. Doctor Ambrose's orders are that nobody should enter this house but those whose business it is to nurse the sick. That is my business now. I'm going to nurse Mary Spence, and you are all going home."

"You wasn't always so ready to take the doctor's orders, Joan Darenth," said a voice from the garden.

"If I was an ignorant fool," said Joan, with one of her sudden outbursts into sharpness, "is that any reason why I should be one all my life? The doctor is a wise man, and it would be well if we did as he bade us."

There was a silence, and then a murmur.

"The doctor's a hard man," said a woman's voice. "He tells some of us it's our own fault when God takes our children."

"And it is your own fault," said Joan, with a fury of scorn and impatience in her voice. "It is your own fault when you bring the children into danger, and won't trouble to drag them out of it. Go, I say, this moment! Have you no sense, no decency, no fear even? Walk out of the

gate, every one of you, and don't come back. Luke, open the gate."

Luke Darenth did as he was told. With a swift, imperious gesture of her right hand Joan dismissed the company. Not one replied or resisted. Cowed by her tones the women slunk away towards the village, holding the children by the hands.

When all were gone but Geoffrey and Luke, Joan came down from the steps as from a pedestal, her arms hanging wearily by her side.

"Was I too angry with them?" she said, with her eyes full of tears. "Poor souls, I should not be so angry if I did not love them so much! But what are you two doing here? Give me my bag and bundle and make haste away; you have not so much right here as the village women! Thank you, Luke; thank you, sir, and good-bye."

"Joan!" Captain Vanborough called after her; but she was gone. He turned upon Luke almost savagely.

"Why can't you stop her? Why do you let her go into that infected hole?"

Luke stared, looked up and down as if searching for an answer in earth and sky, and finding none. At length he said, ruefully enough:

"It do seem as though she found it to be her dooty."

And with this answer he was satisfied, if Geoffrey was not.

Joan went into the cottage and shut the door. There were many things to be done, but she was ready for her work. She was already used to the sight of death. The sick and the dying at Charnwood always sent for Joan.

The baby was sleeping quietly, the father was soothed into lying down upon a low truckle bed, while Joan attended to the mother. Mrs. Spence was in a stupid, half-conscious state. As Doctor Ambrose had said, it was likely that hers would be a bad case. There was another child living, a little girl about nine, who seemed so far to be perfectly well.

Through the silent hours of night Joan watched and waited by the sick woman's bed. Sometimes the baby

woke and had to be fed and hushed to sleep ; sometimes the patient uttered incoherent words, and hoarse, delirious cries. When these were silent the house was still as death, and the hours seemed long.

At last a sleepy bird chirped outside the window. It was four o'clock in the morning of a brilliant summer day.

John Spence stole timidly into the room, and begged to be allowed to sit beside his wife a while.

"Sit quiet, then," she said, soothingly, "while I go downstairs and look after the fire and make some tea. If baby cries, or if Mary wants me and I do not hear, you must call me."

She left him and went into the kitchen. There it occurred to her that the water used for drinking purposes had all to be fetched from a stream at a few yards' distance from the house. She would take a pail and get some before any of the village folk were likely to be up. And thus she would also get a breath of fresh air, for which she had pined in vain in the little stuffy bedroom of the Spences' cottage.

She had filled her pail with water, and held it in her strong right hand ; her left was poised lightly upon her hips. Her hair had become partially loosened, and fell in a rich, dark stream, below her waist ; her face was grave, but it betrayed very little weariness in spite of her night of watching. She turned at last to go, but was suddenly confronted by the figure of a man, who seemed to have started out of the earth at her very feet. It was Captain Vanborough himself.

She recoiled as if she had seen a ghost.

"Don't come near me," she said. "How wicked it is of you to expose yourself to danger in this way ! Don't you know where I have spent the night ?"

"I know," he answered, quietly. "And I have lain here or watched your window ever since I left the cottage gate. I told you I must get speech of you before I went away."

She did not pause to reply. Avoiding him, she walked swiftly and steadily down the road, with a look of displeasure upon her noble face, which he was quick to note.

"You think I am a fool, Joan. Well, suppose I am, at least you can answer the fool according to his folly. Can you never understand that your coldness, your carelessness, is driving me mad? Why should you be so hard on me, and why should you trifle with me? I will not say that I must have an answer, but I beg of you, I entreat of you, to give me one."

His usual gentle indifference of manner had entirely left him. His face was pale beneath its shadowing brown hair, his eyes had a worn expression. Passion and unrest had told upon him more than toil and watching upon her.

She walked on quickly. Her face was rigidly severe.

"I have been sitting all night with the dying and the dead," she responded. "You may be sure I shall not trifle with you now. I never have trifled with you. I have given you an answer half-a-dozen times. You could not have chosen a more unfit moment than this for speaking to me. No, don't touch me, don't come nearer. Do me this one great kindness, sir—go away, for pity's sake, and let me never see your face again."

They had reached the cottage. She entered the garden, and closed the gate upon him, then caught sight of his face, and perhaps for a moment relented.

"Don't look like that," she said, suddenly turning as pale as Geoffrey himself, "don't try to make me think I am hurting you. Oh, how wrong it is of me to talk to you here at all! But, at any rate, you cannot believe I would trifle with you now? You know that I am speaking in solemn earnest when I ask you to go—to let me alone—never, never to speak to me again."

"But I cannot go," said Geoffrey, insistently. "I will not go without another word, although I do not know how to tell you half of what I feel. No woman has ever been to me what you could be. I should be so much better a man, Joan—and surely that will weigh with you—if you would but be my wife."

"You are wrong; you would be no better," she said, abruptly. "No, I am not a fit wife for you. You are a gentleman; I am not a lady."

"You are the grandest woman I have ever known,"

said Geoffrey, looking straight into her eyes, "and therefore you ought to be above giving me so paltry a reason."

She changed colour. The shaft had gone home. "It is a paltry reason," she said, dropping her eyelids, "and it is not the true one."

Involuntarily he drew nearer the gate, but she stepped back and shook her head. "It is not," she said, "just because you are of gentle blood, and I am not; not because your father, and your brother, and Miss Clarice would look down on me; not because all the world would be against us; but because I could not bear to be the wife of a man whom I did not think the best and wisest man alive. I have heard of your life, and I think the very ease and comfort—the waste of it all—would kill me."

"Is that all?" said Geoffrey. "Don't you know that I would order my life as you bade me? For your sake I could do anything."

"That is not all. I might be killed and not grumble. But I should not satisfy you; I should make you unhappy, and you—you would tire of me."

"Tire of you? Does one tire of sunlight? Joan, these reasons of yours are flimsy things. Can you not love me, dear, in spite of them all? Speak the truth, and I will abide by it."

She looked at him steadfastly.

"You will abide by it, will you?" she said, in a very low voice. "I am glad of that. Well, then, listen. Geoffrey Vanborough, I do not love you and I will not be your wife."

"Joan—is that the truth?" he cried.

She gave him a strange look. There was desperation in her eyes.

"It is so true," she said, "that, if you will not take this answer once for all—if ever you come near me again—I shall be forced to leave my father's house and earn my living among strangers as a servant. Do you wish to drive me to that?"

A red flush had mounted to his forehead.

"No," he said, vehemently, "not for the world!" Then he spoke in a gentler tone. "Pardon me, Joan,

I did not understand before. I will not trouble you again."

He raised his hat with ceremonious respect, and turned away. She had gained her point at last.

He stood for one moment on the road, as if to collect his scattered thoughts. Then he took the way to Charnwood, and never once looked back. He had got his dismissal! and he took it like a man.

As for Joan, she carried her pail of water into the house, and set it down with a weary sigh. "It's done now," she said aloud. But her throat began to throb and swell so painfully that she was forced to tear with both hands at the neck of her gown to relieve herself from the sensation of choking. Her lips and cheeks turned white with the effort she made to strangle the passionate sobs with which for a minute or two her bosom heaved. Her eyes swam with burning tears.

"Not love you?" she murmured to herself. "Oh, my darling, my darling, as if I would not give my life for yours! God forgive me for the lie that I have told!"

A faint cry from the upper room restored her to herself. The baby was awake. And for the rest of the day she had no leisure to brood upon her own troubles or upon the mode of Geoffrey Vanborough's departure.

CHAPTER III

IN GILBERT'S HOUSE

GEOFFREY VANBOROUGH stood for the first time at the door of his sister-in-law's drawing-room. Gilbert, his younger brother, had only just returned from his wedding tour, and had brought his young wife to a house in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, which he had furnished with great care, to suit her taste and his own. As his wife was a rich woman, he had not thought it necessary to spare expense. And at the result even Geoffrey stood amazed.

The room itself was a lofty one—lofty and of wide dimensions. From the broad windows, with their lozenge-

shaped panes and painted coats of arms, could be seen a mighty stretch of river, shining like silver in the sun. For the rest, Geoffrey had become conscious only of an impression of much peacock-blue, dead-leaf gold painted with bright-hued birds, black tables and Japanese screens, before his brother's wife came forward and took him by the hand, and then he forgot the furniture.

Her name was Merle, and to her name she always said she owed the fact that Gilbert Vanborough ever looked at her. For he was a lion, an artistic celebrity, and fine ladies had flattered and petted him until simple country girls "just out" palled upon his taste like bread and butter. And then he met Merle Douglas, who had lived all her life in Perthshire with her aunt, Lady Janet Douglas, and had come to London less with the hope of going into society than with a desire for good singing-lessons, and with her, to his own surprise, as well as to that of everybody else, he fell violently in love. She was twenty years of age, very pretty, very sweet, and she had inherited a large fortune from an old uncle, who had made it in the East Indies. So when Gilbert Vanborough married her it was agreed on all sides that he had done very well for himself, but that it was rather a wonder that Lady Janet and Mr. Macpherson, her solicitor, and the young lady's guardian, should have given their consent so easily.

The fact was that Merle, sweet as she was, had a will of her own. She fell in love with Gilbert just as Gilbert did with her, and was quite resolved to marry him. For six months her aunt and her guardian declared that she was too young to marry, and then they gave in. She was twenty-one on her wedding-day and Gilbert was twenty-five. Only one objection beside that of age was brought against the marriage.

The one objection was on the score of health. Gilbert was weakly, and always had been weakly, from his earliest days, though he strenuously maintained the contrary. A puny child never out of his nurse's arms, a delicate boy, too sickly to be sent to a public school, a lad travelling abroad for his health with a tutor instead of going to Oxford or choosing a profession; such had been his history until within the last three years. At the age

of twenty-three, finding himself somewhat stronger, he had settled in London to paint pictures and live on an allowance from his father; and on the whole he had been exceedingly fortunate.

Gilbert had received an injury while he was a child which lamed him for the remainder of his life. When he was a beautiful little fellow of six, and Geoffrey a well-grown, handsome boy of eleven, the brothers had been inseparable. But one unhappy day Geoffrey was forbidden by his father, as a punishment for some slight offence, to take his little brother in the pony-carriage to Reuben Darenth's farm, whither they had planned to go. Then Sir Wilfred and Lady Vanborough went out, never dreaming that Geoffrey would disobey them. Nor would he have done so, but for Gilbert's tears and refusal to be satisfied with anything less than his drive. Geoffrey could never say "No." He drove the carriage down the road, fully meaning to return in ten minutes, but before he had gone a hundred yards an accident took place. A dog-cart passed them; the wheels locked; the little carriage was overturned. Geoffrey escaped unhurt, but Gilbert's foot was lamed for life.

It was said that Sir Wilfred never forgave his elder son for the act of disobedience which had led to such sad results. Geoffrey himself was broken-hearted with grief, and his father's sternness almost maddened him. Henceforward the aim of Geoffrey's life seemed to be to efface himself in Gilbert's favour, to obtain for him all he wanted, to gratify his slightest whim and fancy. Lady Vanborough's death, two years later, confirmed the elder boy in the habit of caring for the younger rather than for himself. Sir Wilfred petted the lame, delicate lad, ignored the little girl, Clarice—four years old at her mother's death, and showed openly that he considered Geoffrey the scapegrace of the family.

Geoffrey accepted the position all too readily. He would not stoop to justify himself when he was blamed for mischief that Gilbert had done. The bad estimation in which his father held him made him reckless. His freaks in boyhood were the talk of the neighbourhood. In early manhood he fell in with a gay and extravagant

set of companions, and outshone them all in lavishness and easy good-nature. He joined a regiment and distinguished himself by cool, gallant courage in action, by princely expenditure and exquisite taste in barrack-quarters and messroom. Of course he was soon over head and ears in debt. Sir Wilfred was not a rich man, nor had he much affection for Geoffrey; but for the sake of the family honour he paid his son's debts again and again. He coupled the last payment, however, with an intimation that this was the last time he should discharge Geoffrey's liabilities. And ever since that intimation, though scarcely on account of it, Geoffrey had been steadier and less extravagant. The change was owing to two things—the influence of Joan Darenth and the effect that his example was producing upon his brother.

Gilbert's extravagance was mild as compared with his; but Geoffrey was worried by it as he had never been by his own. He was more than glad—he was profoundly thankful—that Sir Wilfred loved his younger son better than himself; and nothing had ever given him greater pleasure than the announcement of Gilbert's approaching marriage with Merle Douglas. This marriage, it was to be hoped, would steady him, and then Geoffrey need not feel remorseful for having led his brother astray. This feeling of remorse had really been causing him to amend his ways during the last few months.

This young wife of twenty-one years, who met her brother-in-law with outstretched hands and pleasant words of greeting, was very fair to look upon. Her face was fresh, and soft, and bright, her hair golden; her eyes were grey. Changeful, beautiful eyes they were, shaded with golden brown lashes—sweet, tender, and merry all at once.

"We expected you a week ago," she said to Geoffrey, as he seated himself beside her at her bidding. "Gilbert has been grumbling dreadfully at your non-arrival. He says he shall have to make you sell out and live with us. How should you like that?"

"The question would rather be what you liked, I think."

"I should like what Gilbert liked, of course," said Merle,

with a happy, conscious laugh. "I am so glad you have come, Geoffrey. And I want,"—here her face grew grave—"I want to have a little consultation with you. Hush! don't say a word; I'll tell you afterwards. Here is Gilbert."

Gilbert had lifted the heavy satin curtains which divided Merle's drawing-room from his studio, and advanced with a palette and some brushes in his left hand to greet his brother. There was not a line without beauty in his dark, delicate face; his large, lustrous eyes were full of a softened, thoughtful melancholy; his very fingers—long, white, supple—bore out the character of sensitive refinement expressed in his whole demeanour. Petted and pampered as he had always been, Gilbert's lameness was a misery to him, and at times he showed that it was so. And at such times Geoffrey was miserable too, for he could never lose the feeling that he had been to blame for it; and in spite of his healthy out-door life and great physical strength, there was in him, as in all the Vanboroughs, a morbid vein which came to the surface now and then to the surprise of those who did not know him well. He could never see Gilbert cross a room without pain. And this emotion, unsuspected by more than one or two persons in the world, had influenced all his past life, and was destined still more powerfully to influence his future.

He rose and met his brother, as Gilbert entered. Then the two returned to the window where Merle was sitting; Gilbert with his right hand slipped into its old position through Geoffrey's arm.

"What nice rooms you have here!" said Geoffrey, by way of beginning a conversation.

"Charming, aren't they? We expected you as soon as we came up, didn't we, Merle? You know you promised to go with us last night to Lady Gainsford's dance. What became of you? We were not home until nearly four o'clock."

Geoffrey thought of his grassy couch beneath the starry skies, of the rising sun and the vision of a maiden beside a stream, before he answered.

"I beg your pardon," he said, after that moment's

hesitation. "I must humbly acknowledge that I forgot your invitation to accompany you. Will you forgive me?"

Merle answered by a bright smile, but Gilbert looked discontented. "Of course," he said. "Still, as a general thing, people should remember their engagements."

"Yes," said Geoffrey, quietly fingering his moustache, and looking out upon the broad, bright river, as if his thoughts were occupied with the shipping. "I had business, and I suppose it put the invitation out of my head."

"Have you been to Charnwood, lately?" Gilbert asked, as he sank into a great blue armchair at Merle's side:

"I was there yesterday," he said, tranquilly.

Gilbert turned his fine dark head upon the cushioned back of the luxurious seat and looked at him with slightly lifted eyebrows. Geoffrey replied in a docile manner to the unspoken question.

"About a horse. I went to Darenth's."

"Not home?"

"No."

"Hadn't you time to go and see Clarice?" said Merle pityingly.

"No; I hadn't time," said Geoffrey, with such simple composure of manner that Gilbert's sharp, curious gaze relaxed. He had reason of his own for anxiety concerning Geoffrey's visits to Charnwood. He clasped his white hands lazily behind his head and sighed.

"Geoffrey, you look very tired," said Merle. "Have you been busy lately?"

"Busy doing nothing," he answered, with a smile. "Perhaps I am tired of that. I sometimes think I will sell out and go off to Australia, America, or somewhere. I think I want a change."

Indeed, he looked strangely worn and haggard, Merle thought to herself; but as Gilbert seemed to take no interest in the subject, she let it drop. The brothers fell to talking lightly about Paris, where the bride and bridegroom had spent their honeymoon, and it wanted only ten minutes to the dinner hour when Gilbert roused himself to say that he must go and dress.

He had no sooner closed the door than Merle turned to her brother-in-law with a question.

"Do you think he looks as well as usual?" she asked, quickly.

"He is a little pale. I have often seen him look worse. You must remember, Merle, that I told you before your marriage that Gilbert would never be a strong man. What does he say about himself?"

"Nothing; but he has turned so white and faint two or three times since we came home, and once in Paris, that I think he must be ill. And I want you, Geoffrey—I want you so much to get him to see a doctor."

"You can persuade him to that better than I, Merle," said Geoffrey, smiling. "You must not be over anxious about him."

Merle smiled in return, but there was a shade of trouble upon her brow, even while she passed on to other topics of conversation.

The three dined pleasantly together. Merle and Gilbert had an engagement at ten o'clock, but until that hour they were at liberty. Geoffrey declined an invitation to accompany them. His head ached, he said, and he would rather go back to Claridge's when they set off, and get a good night's rest. And, although he spoke cheerfully, and ate his dinner like anybody else, it was plain that something was amiss with him.

When they returned to the drawing-room the lamps were lit, but the curtains undrawn. They had gathered round the window, and were speaking of the reflections of moonlight in the water, admiring the beauty of the darkening sky, when Gilbert's servant entered with some letters. There were two for Merle, three for Gilbert, and one—curiously enough—for Geoffrey, with the Charnwood post-mark.

"From father," said Gilbert, carelessly handing it to his brother. "We mentioned that you would be with us this week. Well, Merle; fresh invitations, I suppose?"

"Yes, I wish people would let us alone."

"Let us live and die in solitude, my little bird? Such happiness is not vouchsafed to any one of us," said her husband, softly. He pressed her hand as he spoke. The

two were lovers still. "A solitude *en deux* suits me best," he said, smiling, and then he turned to Geoffrey, who was frowning over his letter. "No bad news, I hope?"

"No," said Geoffrey, looking up thoughtfully. "I am only puzzled by a sentence or two in my father's letter. Can you throw any light upon them, I wonder?"

"Not I," Gilbert answered. "His riddles are often far too hard for me to read. What does he say?"

He came to his brother's side, leaned one arm upon his shoulder, and looked at the letter. Geoffrey pointed with his finger to the place, and began to read aloud from the bottom of the page.

"'I am corresponding with Mr. Forrester, Secretary——'"

Here the page had to be turned. "You need not read it aloud," said Gilbert irritably; "I can see it for myself."

"I am reading it to Merle," said Captain Vanborough, in the tone of courteous repression which he sometimes used even to the well-beloved Gilbert, and proceeded without further interruption.

——"'Secretary to the X—— Hospital for Children afflicted with Incurable Hip-diseases, concerning a donation which I recently transmitted to him, and for which I hold his own receipt. On examining the half-yearly report of this Institution I found my name down for a paltry five pounds instead of fifty, my presentation to the Hospital being thus curtailed, and my name excluded from the list of governors. Upon writing to remonstrate, I received so extraordinary a communication in return that I must beg to call your instant attention to it. Be so good as to take the early train to Charnwood to-morrow.' Now, that cheque—Good heavens! Gilbert, what is the matter?"

For Gilbert's hand had closed upon his brother's arm with a convulsive twitch; his face was ghastly white, his mouth livid. Geoffrey was only just in time to save him from falling heavily to the ground.

"Lay him down," said Merle, quietly, although her face was nearly as white as his. "He was like this in Paris. I must have a doctor now."

She rang the bell sharply as she spoke and called for hartshorn and brandy. But these remedies failed of their usual effect. Once he partially revived, and then sank back in a second swoon more death-like than the first. And then, at Merle's earnest request, Geoffrey went to seek a doctor.

When he returned with a grey-haired, keen-looking man of fifty who lived in the next street, Gilbert had recovered consciousness. Mr. Serle sat down beside him, felt his pulse, asked a few questions, laid his hand quietly upon the young man's chest and side. Then he nodded. "Ah, yes, you will soon feel better," he said, in a reassuring tone. "You must keep quiet—not excite yourself too much. You will be better in a day or two. In the meantime, as I have brought my stethoscope, I will just sound your lungs—though I think they are right enough."

Gilbert made no opposition. The examination was over in a few minutes, and Mr. Serle withdrew, cheerfully remarking that complete rest and quiet were the best restoratives. By an almost imperceptible sign he motioned Geoffrey to follow him.

"You are his brother, I think?" he said, when they found themselves alone.

"I am," replied Geoffrey, standing very straight and looking stern in order to veil his anxiety. "Do you think he is ill? Is there anything wrong with him?"

"I fear something very seriously wrong."

"Why? What? What is the matter with him?"

"Heart disease," said the surgeon, gravely.

CHAPTER IV

"MINE OWN FAMILIAR FRIEND"

"No immediate danger. Keep him quiet."

These were the words that rang in Geoffrey's ear as the doctor left the house. He turned back to the empty rooms, which Gilbert had furnished and adorned with so much care, sat down and covered his face with his hands. His

mind was full of confusion and dismay. He had never thought lately of the possibility of losing the brother to whom he was so tenderly attached. And the poor girl, almost a child in years, whom Gilbert had made his wife ! How was she to be warned of his danger, and how would she receive the warning ? Geoffrey dared not take upon himself the responsibility of telling her until Mr. Serle authorised him to do so. After all, it was possible—just possible—that Mr. Serle had made a mistake. A physician's view of the case must be obtained before either Merle or Sir Wilfred was alarmed about it. In the meantime, Geoffrey felt that he must bear his burden of anxiety alone.

He had asked whether he could be of any use in his brother's room ; but Merle had come out to say, with some perplexed embarrassment, that Gilbert seemed to dislike the thought of Geoffrey's entrance. She hoped, however, that he would soon sleep ; for if he slept, the doctor said, he would be considerably better in the morning. So Geoffrey went into the drawing-room, where, after consultation with the servant about sleeping room—being determined not to leave the house until morning—he gave himself up to a train of sad reflection which lasted for an hour or more. Then he heard a light footfall on the floor, and found that Merle was standing by his side. She had exchanged her shining white dress for a soft and dainty dressing-gown of pale blue ; the light of the little lamp she carried fell upon her face, and showed that, although colourless, it was strong and brave.

"Is he worse ?" said Geoffrey, starting up with a sense of dread.

"No, I think not. But he cannot rest ; and it is bad for him to lie awake and vex himself about anything. He seems to think that he has offended you in some way."

"Poor fellow, how could he have offended me ?" said Geoffrey, full of concern. "Shall I go and see him ?"

"If you please. I think he would like it. And, Geoffrey—if he has done anything—to offend you—you will not be angry with him, will you ?"

"Angry, my dear child ?" Geoffrey looked down

upon her from his stately height with a faint stirring of amusement about the corners of his lips, but he spoke very gently. "Do you think I was ever angry with Gilbert in my life?"

She tried to smile, but he saw a tear trembling on the long lashes.

"Dear Merle," he said, tenderly, "you may be sure that I would not vex him, or be angry with him, as you phrase it, for the world."

She murmured a word of apology, a word of thanks, but looked uneasy still. Geoffrey wondered what Gilbert could have been saying.

He found the invalid in bed, supported by pillows, labouring for breath, and evidently oppressed and ill at ease. Speech was so difficult to him that at first he only looked at his brother with a wide, pathetic gaze of utter helplessness, while Geoffrey smoothed back the damp hair from his pallid forehead, and uttered some cheerful, soothing words. Then the elder man took the clammy fingers into his own warm grasp, and passed one arm beneath the heaving shoulders, so as to raise him into a slightly more erect position. Gilbert rested his head against the broad strong breast, closed his eyes, and seemed relieved. But presently he opened his eyes again, fixed them on Geoffrey's face, and strove to speak.

"Don't betray me," were the first words he said.

"Certainly not," was Geoffrey's steady answer, though he had not the faintest idea what Gilbert meant. "Did I ever betray you, Bertie?"

The use of an old pet name brought a faint look of pleasure to the sick man's face.

"No," he panted, "never." Then with a hoarse gasp and a convulsive twitch of the nerveless fingers, "Forgive me."

"I have nothing to forgive," said Geoffrey. But seeing a look of anguish, he hastened to add, "I forgive you, of course—whatever it may be for."

Oh, the comfort of those kindly words, the strength of those untiring arms, as the deathly sickness and faintness gained dominion once more over body and spirit alike. Like a weary child, Gilbert rested in his brother's arms,

while Geoffrey stood silent, gentle as a woman, steady as a rock.

Merle brought a cordial, and when he had swallowed it, Gilbert murmured, so low that she could not hear :

"Don't tell her."

"No, I won't tell her."

"You—are—not—very angry ? "

"No." And then, moved by a sudden impulse, Geoffrey stooped and kissed his brother's forehead. He had never done so since the days of childhood. He never did so again. This kiss was the latest sign of perfect love and confidence which passed between them.

Still holding his brother by the hand, still resting upon his arm, Gilbert sank by degrees into a quiet sleep. Geoffrey would not lay him down upon the pillows for fear of rousing him ; he preferred to stand, cramped and weary, but motionless, until dawn. Then, when Gilbert stirred a little and awoke, the brother was able gently to free himself and see him fall into another quiet slumber, which, as Mr. Serle declared in his early visit, would be of the greatest service to him. The present risk was over, but he must avoid any excitement of mind or body which might induce other attacks of faintness. With great care, and attention to certain rules, the doctor thought that he might live in tolerable comfort for years. But he was the first to advocate the summoning of a physician, who was well-known in London for his skill in such cases ; and Geoffrey went at once to Doctor Hamilton's house and arranged that Gilbert should visit him as soon as possible. For as Gilbert was going on well, he thought that he might as well comply with his father's request and run down to Hertfordshire by the twelve o'clock train.

He had leisure now to think of the sentences that had perplexed him in his father's letter. The tone of the whole communication was exceedingly formal and cold ; but then Geoffrey did not look for affection from his father. It was the fact mentioned that puzzled him, especially as he saw that he was expected to furnish an explanation of it, inasmuch as the cheque for fifty pounds had been placed in his hands, with instructions to forward it to the hospital in which his father was interested. Geoffrey

taxed his memory in vain concerning that cheque for fifty pounds.

He was in the railway-carriage, smoking a cigar, glancing from time to time at a copy of the *Field*, and wondering why on earth his father could not settle his own affairs without summoning him away from London, when a sudden remembrance of certain circumstances attending the dispatch of that donation to the Hospital for Incurable Children flashed across his mind.

He had left Charnwood on the 6th of February, and gone up to town with Gilbert, then in bachelor's quarters. He noticed that Gilbert was in low spirits, and attributed his depression to the fact that Lady Janet Douglas was still opposing his engagement to Merle. Before they parted the younger brother asked if he could lend him some money. He had to pay a debt of one hundred pounds, which he had lost at *écarté*, and how to pay he did not know. Geoffrey was in bad case himself; he, however, handed over forty pounds, almost all that he possessed, dropped a few anxious words of remonstrance, and advised him to apply to his father. He was then on his way to Aldershot, where his regiment was stationed, and Gilbert accompanied him to the railway station. At the very last moment Geoffrey put his hand in his pocket and brought out a letter.

"Confound it, I've forgotten to post this," he said. "Post it for me, will you, Bertie? And don't lose it; there's an uncrossed cheque inside. Send it on, will you? It's for fifty."

"Fifty to a hospital?" said Gilbert, with a look of scorn. "I wish he would increase one's allowance instead of bothering himself about hospitals."

And then the train started, and Gilbert was left upon the platform with the letter in his hand.

Geoffrey wrote soon afterwards to inquire whether the debt had been paid. He had a postcard in return, "All arranged—thanks.—G.V." And he heard no more about it—no more even about his forty pounds, which he would have found it convenient to receive.

All these details became startlingly clear to him as he sat in one corner of the railway carriage and tried to smoke.

Gilbert then was responsible for the sending of that cheque ; what had he done ? The secretary of the hospital must have been grossly careless—that was the only explanation of the matter that Geoffrey could allow. And yet it occurred to him to wish that he had posted the letter with his own hands.

The nearest railway station was only half-a-mile from Charnwood Manor, an imposing-looking place, standing due north and south, built of grey stone and approached from the road by an avenue of lime trees, terminating in a green lawn dotted with flower beds and ornamental pots of plants.

Geoffrey entered and inquired for his father and sister, and was told that Miss Vanborough was out, and that Sir Wilfred would be glad to see him as soon as he had lunched. Luncheon was already prepared for him in the dining-room, and Sir Wilfred was in his study.

Geoffrey walked into the dining-room, but did not sit down to eat. Something in the nature of recent events had taken away his appetite. He broke a biscuit, drank a glass of brown sherry, and proceeded to his father's study.

It was Sir Wilfred's business-room, as well as his private study, and no one entered it without his permission. Geoffrey, grown man as he was, disliked it exceedingly ; it would be hardly any exaggeration to say that he dreaded a summons thither.

Father and son had been so long estranged that Geoffrey did not wonder when he received no warmer greeting than a slight bend of Sir Wilfred's head as he entered the room. Geoffrey went to the mantelpiece, placed his elbow upon it, and stood there calm and imperturbable to all appearance, but in truth excessively ill at ease.

Sir Wilfred turned his pale, proud face towards his son, and observed him closely. There was not much likeness between the father and his eldest-born. Geoffrey's brown eyes, as well as his gentle nature, came from his mother's side ; he was no true Vanborough. To Sir Wilfred, to Gilbert, and to Clarice alike belonged the fine, white features, the passionate dark eyes, the sensitive play of the thin nostrils, which had been characteristic of the Vanborough family for many generations. Geoffrey's

face was less subtle, perhaps less intellectual, certainly more lovable.

"You missed the first train," said the father, interlacing his white fingers upon his knee, and leaning back in his chair.

"Yes; Gilbert was ill, and I could not easily leave the house."

Then, averting his eyes, Geoffrey told the story of his brother's fainting-fit, of the doctor's visit, and of his wish to return early on the morrow. He said nothing of the danger, nor of the celebrated physician, but he saw that his report made his father anxious. Sir Wilfred's fingers moved uneasily, he asked a rapid question or two, then was silent for a moment. Geoffrey toyed with an ornament upon the mantelpiece and was silent too.

"He might have been a healthy man," said Sir Wilfred, at last, the bitterness of years discovering itself in his tone, "if he had never met with that unhappy accident."

Geoffrey stood like a stone. He had trained himself to meet his father's taunts with stoical indifference of manner.

After another moment's silence Sir Wilfred spoke again.

"Now to business. About this matter of the cheque. On the 6th of last February I gave you a cheque for fifty pounds to be sent to the X—— Hospital; I have a memorandum of it in my account-book and cheque-book; there can be no mistake about it."

"No, I suppose not."

Sir Wilfred referred to a paper in his hand, on which he seemed to have made some notes.

"I asked you to write a letter to Mr. Forrester, enclosing that cheque. Did you do so?"

"I suppose I did."

"You suppose—you suppose!" repeated his father, dashing down the paper on the desk in a sudden fury of impatience. "Do you not remember whether you wrote it or not, sir?"

Geoffrey lifted his head from his hand. "Excuse me, he said, "if I cannot see the object of this interrogatory. Certainly, I wrote the letter and enclosed your cheque.

If Mr. Forrester has not received it, that is his affair and not yours—not mine. I would advise you to write to the Post Office about it.”

His father looked at him as if more puzzled than displeased by the haughty quietness of his tone.

“Do you remember what you said in your letter?”

“Not exactly.”

“I can show you a copy of it. I have the original in your own handwriting.”

He placed a letter in his son's hands. Geoffrey looked at it, turned it over, and seemed about to speak, then refrained himself, and read it through, with a gradually darkening brow, and a red flush rising to his cheek. It ran as follows :—

“SIR,—I beg to enclose a five-pound note from my father, Sir Wilfred Vanborough, as a donation to the X—Hospital. Be so kind as to send me a receipt, and believe me to remain,

“Yours faithfully,

“G. VANBOROUGH.”

The letter was dated from Geoffrey's club.

For a moment Geoffrey's head turned round. What could be the meaning of this impudent assumption of his name, this extraordinary falsification of facts? “Let me see the original,” he said, sternly.

“Presently. Perhaps you would first like to see another document which was forwarded to me a few days later. No, I shall not let it go out of my hands. Come here to the desk and read it.”

The blood was beginning to throb wildly in the young man's veins. It needed a strong effort to make himself look at the paper on Sir Wilfred's desk, instead of simply walking out of the house and never more returning to it. But he made the effort and looked. The paper was a receipt for fifty pounds, and not five.

Sir Wilfred's voice shook, in spite of its scornful tone, as he continued, “Forrester never sent this receipt. He sent one for *five* pounds. This is a forgery. The money was stolen—stolen, do you hear? And the letter, the

copy of which I showed you, is in your handwriting. Can you deny it? Good God, Geoffrey, you cannot have brought this dishonour upon us! Explain it—if you can; I—I shall try to believe you.”

His voice broke with a gasp. There was something irresistibly pathetic in the way that the father clung to a half-belief in the truth and honour of the son whom he had never loved. He leaned forward over the desk, his hands on the paper that he wished Geoffrey to see, his eyes fixed on his son's face, the drops of perspiration standing like beads on his high, white brow. And Geoffrey knew that if he uttered a word of indignant denial, or fiery and indignant protest, even now he could set his father's mind at rest. And yet he was silent.

He drew back a step, and a shudder passed through his strong frame. He dared not meet the gaze of those strained, beseeching eyes, or face the agony of doubt and hope expressed by those quivering features; he would not entirely lose his self-command. He had never thought that his father would be so near trusting him, so near believing in his honour and uprightness! It was doubly hard to keep silence and let himself be branded by the name of liar, forger, thief. Was there no way of escape open?

The silence had seemed very long to both of them before he said quietly:

“Will you let me look at these papers a moment? I will give you them back unhurt.”

Sir Wilfred yielded. He pushed them over to him without a word, and sank back in his chair. Then Geoffrey sat down and drew the papers before him. So far he had preserved his self-control; now he feared lest it might fail him. He put his elbows on the table, and arched his hands over his eyes, so that his father might not see his face.

For now he knew, as he fancied he had known, and had indeed suspected all along, that the writer of that lying letter, the forger of the receipt, the robber of his father's money, was no other than his brother Gilbert.

Gilbert, the well-beloved brother, the favourite son, the happy husband—the man whom Geoffrey had loved with

a love "passing the love of woman"—it was Gilbert who had wronged his father, and plotted that the blame should rest on other shoulders. Was there then any truth, any love, any honour, left in this wicked and miserable world? Would it not almost be better to go out of it and leave its good things to those who loved them better than right and truth?

Some words from an old Book which he had scarcely thought of since childhood suddenly started out of a remote corner of his mind, and stood before him with terrible distinctness.

"For it is not an open enemy that hath done me this dishonour; for then I could have borne it. . . . But it was even thou, my companion, my guide, my own familiar friend."

Ay, my companion—my friend—my brother! Oh, Gilbert, Gilbert!

CHAPTER V

AT BEECHFIELD

ONE of Gilbert's most dangerous accomplishments was the facility with which he imitated other persons' handwriting. Added to this was the fact that his ordinary hand was so like Geoffrey's that only close observers knew the difference. A very little care, a very little cleverness, and the letter sent to Mr. Forrester was indistinguishable, save perhaps to an expert, from one in Geoffrey's own handwriting. Then the receipt; well, this was written on a printed form, and regularly stamped; here few alterations had been necessary. A cipher had been added to the figure five in one place; in the other, the word "five" had been so cleverly altered, without erasure, into "fifty," that it defied detection to any but a careful and practised eye. Thus Sir Wilfred had received his receipt in due form for the right amount, and the Hospital had received five pounds. The forty-five pounds remaining—what a paltry sum for which to run so great a risk!—had probably gone

towards the satisfying of Gilbert's creditors. Why he had committed so mad an action, Geoffrey could not tell—detection was certain, disgrace following on detection infallible.

Unless—as, with a terrible pang of pain, Geoffrey acknowledged was possible—he had contrived to throw the blame upon his brother and counted on his brother's generosity and strength to bear that burden in his stead!

After that throb of bitter pain came a moment of black, blind rage, in which he cursed his brother's cowardice, and half resolved to speak the truth and leave him to his fate.

Then two pictures rose before his mind with the sudden vividness of a landscape illuminated by a flash of lightning. In one, a pale, sickly-looking little boy was trying to walk a few steps with the help of a crutch and of an elder boy's arm. A brown-eyed, sad-faced woman was kneeling on one knee beside them, her hands outstretched towards the cripple, as she said, in tender, tremulous tones—"You will always help him, Geoffrey? You will always take care of him, will you not?"

That was the first picture.

In the second he saw a man's anguish-stricken face and feeble form supported by an elder brother's arm and shoulder. The agony of dread in the wide-open dark eyes came vividly to his remembrance. He could almost hear the hoarsely-muttered words—"You won't betray me—you won't tell *her*. Forgive me," and the sound of his own voice in answer—"I forgive you, whatever it may be."

He had tied his own hands. Better so, perhaps. He could not bring Gilbert to disgrace. He could not lay the father's head low in the grave with grief, or break the heart of the fair young wife, or see his brother die before his eyes in some wild paroxysm of dread and shame. And all these things might happen, as he well knew, if he cleared himself. And what had he to lose? The only woman he loved had rejected him; his father would be glad to see him out of the way, if he could go decently, without the exposure of a public trial and condemnation; he had lost

his brother by worse than death. He was a ruined man ; let them do with him what they would.

His face wore a strange, grey pallor as at last he raised it from his hands, but it was resolved and firm. He met his father's eager glance with stony calmness.

" I have nothing to say," he said, quietly pushing back the papers.

A groan broke from Sir Wilfred's lips.

" Do you mean that you—you—forged that receipt ? " he said, his voice sinking to a hoarse whisper.

" I am not bound to criminate myself. I cannot answer," said Geoffrey, starting up from his seat.

He felt that he could sit no longer in his father's presence.

There was a pause. Then Sir Wilfred leaned over his desk, and spoke in hoarse, half-trembling tones, as though he thought that they might be overheard.

" A refusal to explain is tantamount to a confession. Forrester is in the next room. He brought down your letter this morning, scenting something wrong. He says he—he must prosecute if the matter is not satisfactorily explained. What am I to say to him ? "

" I cannot help you, sir. Does he want me to go with him to London ? "

" Good heavens, how can you talk in that way ? " said the father, with a look of disgust and passion, which Geoffrey met with steady composure. " Is the shame nothing to you ? Is the disgrace you bring upon your name nothing ? Are you so lost to honour that it is nothing to you that you may have to stand in a felon's dock—that I shall be known as the father of a forger and a thief—that your sister will never hold up her head again for shame ? Is it nothing to you to think of the grief and pain you will give your poor brother Gilbert ? Have you no care for him, if you have none for yourself or me ? I thank God that your mother is not alive to see this day."

If he expected to sting Geoffrey into a retort, he was disappointed. A look of unutterable pain had crossed his son's brow, but he neither looked up nor spoke. White as his father had never seen him look before, white and stricken as if by a sorrow too great for words, but passive, gentle, unresentful still and silent as the grave.

Sir Wilfred made one last appeal. It was hard for him yet to believe that a son of his had done this shameful thing.

"For God's sake, Geoffrey," he said, passionately, "give me one word of explanation—of excuse. Have you nothing to say for yourself?"

A light flashed into the man's grave brown eyes, a spasm of pain made his mouth twitch beneath its heavy moustache, but after that moment's struggle he answered steadily:

"Nothing."

Sir Wilfred rose, trembling with agitation, his hand raised, his face convulsed. "Then you are no son of mine. I disown you from this day forward. I have one son left—only one."

His hands fell to his side; he swayed to and fro, until Geoffrey feared that he would fall, and made a hasty step forward to assist him. But the movement recalled Sir Wilfred to himself; he waved off the proffered help with a look of scorn, rested with his hand on the table, until a little strength seemed to return to him, and then moved with slow and uncertain steps to the door. Here he paused and looked at his son.

"You will remain here," he said, "till I come back."

Geoffrey bowed his head. He did not know how long was the time that he spent alone. It was, in fact, less than an hour; it seemed like a week to him. At last the door opened, and he stood up, erect, calm, half expecting to be confronted with the functionaries of the law. But to his surprise Sir Wilfred entered the room alone, and shut the door behind him.

The father's aspect was changed. The paroxysm of wounded pride, almost of wounded tenderness, had passed and left him cold as ice, hard as polished steel. He seated himself at his desk before he spoke, and the sharply-chiselled utterance of each word, the biting precision of every sentence, stamped its meaning deeply upon the listener's heart.

"I have saved you from prison. For the sake of my family, my children, I do not wish to see you in the dock, where you ought to be. For Gilbert's sake I went as near deception as I could without absolutely dishonouring my-

self. I did not show the man the forged receipt. He has received an apology for my mistake; and gone away with a hundred pounds for his charity in his pocket. But I have the receipt still, and your letter."

He paused, and fixed his cold, glittering eyes on Geoffrey's face.

"If you want me to save you from disgrace you must agree to my terms; otherwise I will expose you to-morrow."

"I will do what you wish, if I can," said Geoffrey, trying to shake off the incapacity for speech which seemed to hang upon him like a nightmare, but speaking hoarsely and unsteadily.

Sir Wilfred went on, with a pause between each new proposition, to which Geoffrey silently assented. "You will quit my house to-night, and never show your face here again in my lifetime. You will throw up your commission, and leave England as soon as possible. If you were to change your name I should be the better pleased."

"No," said Geoffrey, with a sudden and bitter flash of wrath, "my name, at least, I will not surrender."

"Keep it, then. I shall hear it again, no doubt, in some story of disgrace and crime. The title will be yours, too. But this I demand—this is essential—you must join me in cutting off the entail."

"That the estate may be settled on Gilbert?"

"Yes, on Gilbert," said the father, with some emotion. "On Gilbert, who, crippled as he is, has never stained his name with anything approaching dishonour. I may live to be thankful that you lamed him, if it is his lameness that has preserved him from dishonesty and vice. It is he who must come after me at Charnwood; his children, not yours, who must grow up to call the land their own."

Geoffrey turned away, involuntarily clenching his hand, and biting his lip until it bled.

"I will do what you wish," he said, in a muffled voice. "Let Gilbert have everything—everything. Need we talk of it any longer? Have a little pity on me, father, and let me go."

"Go, then," said Sir Wilfred, coldly. "Go, and let me never see you again. Remember that if you break my conditions, I shall place the papers at once in Forrester's hands, and let him make what use of them he will. The story will then have publicity, if nothing else. I shall tell as little as possible to anyone, so long as you agree to my terms and live out of England. For the rest, I will see Pengelly, and he can let you know if any business has to be transacted. Leave your address with him. I am quite willing to make you a half-yearly allowance, unless you further misconduct yourself."

Geoffrey responded with the first touch of natural resentment he had as yet allowed himself to show—resentment mingled with an agony of pain. "I shall not touch a penny of your money, sir, nor will I trouble you any longer with my presence. I wish you good-afternoon. I presume that my portmanteau and other little matters can be sent after me to the station?"

He had been driven into bravado at last, Sir Wilfred thought; yet he was not without admiration for the bold bearing and undaunted eye with which Geoffrey took his leave. Once or twice the shock had almost overwhelmed the young man, but his pride, his courage, the curiously patient endurance of wrong which had characterised him as a boy, had come to his aid in this last ordeal, and carried him safely through it.

Sir Wilfred was left alone. The key was turned in the door as Geoffrey went downstairs.

Captain Vanborough gave a few brief orders to the old man-servant with as tranquil a voice, as calm a face as usual. Then he turned his back upon his father's house and strode away.

It was not until nightfall that he became calm enough to consider what steps he ought to take, and nightfall found him some miles away from Charnwood, lying face downwards on a bed of fern in a lonely copse. Where was he? On looking round he recognised the place. It was a plantation adjoining the grounds of a Mrs. Tremaine, whose son was Geoffrey's oldest and dearest friend. Nigel Tremaine had always ranked next to Gilbert in Geoffrey's heart as friend and comrade; he might hold

the first place there now; there was nobody else to fill it. But perhaps he would not care to keep any place in it at all.

Captain Vanborough turned his steps slowly towards his friend's house. Bright, mirthful girls were Nigel's three sisters—Emmie, and Fan, and Nora. He was glad that Clarice was amongst them. It was good that she should be withdrawn sometimes from the gloom and shadow of lonely Charnwood; it would be better still if that should come to pass—for which he knew that Nigel hoped—that Clarice should leave Charnwood altogether and keep house happily with him at Beechfield.

Vanborough walked up to the house, keeping in the shade as much as possible, for he did not wish to be observed. The library window, he knew, would open from without by a slight pressure if the bolt were undrawn, and he thought the servants would not have fastened it so early. The stable clock struck nine as he stood at the window—like a burglar, as he said to himself with a bitter smile—and found it yield to his hand.

Once there he rang the bell. He knew that old Anthony, the butler, would respond to it.

"Now, Anthony, will you do me a kindness? Get Mr. Tremaine out of the drawing-room and ask him to see me, without letting anyone else know. I have come upon important business, and I want to see him alone."

Old Anthony bustled away upon his errand, after lighting up a large candelabra on a side table. When he was gone Geoffrey stepped to the table and blew all the candles out but one. He fancied that his face told his tale too plainly in the brilliant light.

Quick, manly steps along the passage soon announced his friend's approach. Nigel Tremaine entered, a man of seven-and-twenty, half a head shorter than Geoffrey, fair and pale, with frank blue eyes as bright and keen as tempered steel. Perhaps he felt some surprise at Captain Vanborough's sudden appearance, but he simply came up and offered his friend his hand with a word of greeting.

Geoffrey only responded to the salutation by a slight shake of the head. Then Nigel said :

"What is it?"

"I've done for myself at last, Tremaine," said Geoffrey, with the mockery of a smile.

Tremaine leaned over the back of a chair and looked at him attentively. "How?"

"I am ruined—disgraced—dishonoured. That's all."

"I'll see you through it," said Nigel, quietly.

"Thanks. You can't. And you would not say so if you knew all. I have come to bid you good-bye. I had rather you heard the story from me than from Sir Wilfred, and to ask you whether, under the circumstances, you think I may see Clarice?"

"Why shouldn't you see Clarice? And may I ask why you want to say good-bye to me?"

"Because," said Vanborough, with a low, fierce energy of tone with which he seemed to desire to reduce his interlocutor to silence, "because I am going to leave England as soon as I can arrange my affairs; because my father has forbidden me his house; because I owe it to his forbearance that my name will not appear in to-morrow's papers as 'committed for trial' on a charge of forgery——"

"I don't care a rap what your father says or does," said Nigel, ruthlessly cutting short his friend's explanation, and searching his face keenly with his fearless blue eyes, "and I never did. He has believed false reports about you before now, but I am not aware that I ever agreed with him on those points."

"He has all the evidence against me. I tell you that but for his suppression of one of the documents I should have to undergo a fourteen years' sentence at Portland."

"Why do you have it suppressed? Why not bring it out to the light of day and clear yourself?"

"I can't."

"Or won't?" said Nigel, softly. Then he left his leaning position, went to his friend's side, and placed his hand upon his arm. "Evidence? Absurd!" he said, in almost a light tone, though his blue eyes flashed fire from under their thick lashes. "How long have I known you? Five-and-twenty years or thereabouts. If, after

those years of close comradeship, you can look me in the face and tell me that you—*you*—have stolen money from your father, or from anybody else—why, all I can say is that I shall never trust man or woman more. Out with it, Geoffrey, old man; I should like to hear you plead guilty to a charge of that sort."

Geoffrey looked him in the face, seemed about to speak, then dropped his eyes, abashed and confounded.

"I can't deny it, Nigel."

"Possibly not. Do you dare to affirm it?"

Again the silence, but this time Geoffrey's eyes did not sink.

The look bent upon his friend's face was almost pathetic in its mournfulness, but it was clear and open as the noonday. And now he did not refuse Nigel's proffered hand.

"It is perfectly ridiculous," said Tremaine, walking about the room a few minutes later, in half-simulated fury, with a view of raising his visitor's spirits, but keeping meanwhile a watchful eye on Geoffrey, whose depression had struck him as unnatural, "it is perfectly preposterous to see the way in which you let yourself be trampled upon. Sir Wilfred ought to be ashamed of himself. To have known you as I have known you all these years, and then to think that you could be guilty of such utter meanness—not to be certain that you would cut off your right hand rather than—— Geoffrey, my dear old fellow, this will never do."

For Geoffrey was sitting in an armchair, his elbows on his knees and his hands over his face, sobbing like a child.

Nigel went to the door and locked it, then took a carafe from a sideboard and held a tumbler of water to his friend's lips. He did not say anything at all, and in a few minutes his silence restored Geoffrey to calmness. He started up and went to the window, muttering something about making a fool of himself, and that it was all Nigel's own fault for never taking things like other people.

"Yes, I suppose you would have borne it better if I had turned you out of the house," said Tremaine, dryly.

"When did you dine? You haven't dined, of course. Had any lunch to-day?"

"What on earth does it matter? I'm not a woman, who can't exist without three meals a day. Yes, I lunched."

"And where were you last night?" Nigel asked, cautiously trying to find out when and where the trouble all began.

"In London. Gilbert was ill." Something in the tone struck curiously on Nigel's ear. He flashed a keen glance at his friend, which Geoffrey did not see. He was shading his eyes with one hand, and leaning against the window frame. "I sat up."

"You were sitting up with Gilbert?"

"Yes."

"And you expect to keep your strength and courage on that regimen? You will certainly not see Clarice before you have dined," said Nigel, ringing the bell.

"You talk as if I were a fool."

"It has always been the object of my life to prevent your becoming one. Anthony, Captain Vanborough would like some dinner."

"I've laid it, sir," said the butler, triumphantly. "I knew he would want it from the looks of him. And his room's ready upstairs."

"Even Anthony's against you," said Tremaine, with a smile. "Show Captain Vanborough to his room then, Anthony. You can see Clarice after dinner, you know. She is staying the night, and so, by-the-bye, are you; there is no hurry."

Vanborough looked back, half inclined to protest, but a smiling gleam from Nigel's eye silenced him. He followed Anthony upstairs, and Mr. Tremaine walked into the dining-room to await his guest's return.

CHAPTER VI

FAREWELL !

NIGEL TREMAINE allowed no allusion to be made to the events of that day while his friend was dining. They talked about politics and French cookery, of a trip that they had made together the year before to Norway, and of foreign countries in general. Vanborough began his meal with an utter loathing for food of any kind, but after the first few mouthfuls his appetite revived, and he found that Tremaine's advice had been marked by his usual good sense.

"Does Gilbert know of this?" said Nigel presently. They were sitting opposite one another at the table.

"I don't suppose my father has communicated with him. I have not. I shall scarcely have time. Besides, he is too ill to be bothered."

"Ill? What's the matter with him?"

"That reminds me. I told my father a little, but not the whole truth, about his illness, and I do not want to alarm Clarice. I think you had better know all." And then, in a few words, he gave an account of Gilbert's state. "Now, when I am away you can look after him a little, perhaps."

His voice was calm, but his lips looked dry and his eyes restless. "I will do my best," said Nigel coolly, "if I am in England."

"Are you thinking of leaving England?"

"I am, rather. I want to see the other side of the world. We might go together."

"I wonder if anybody ever had a friend like you," said Vanborough, looking at him across the table.

"Am I not a man, and a brother—almost, if not quite?" said Tremaine, with a smile.

A thrill ran through Geoffrey's strong frame. He

answered "Yes" very quietly, after a moment's pause, and then sat silent.

"Let us go back to the library," said Nigel at last. "Shall I send Clarice to you?"

"If you please. But don't go away. We should both like to keep you with us."

Vanborough was standing by the library table, grave and pale, but quite self-possessed, when his friend entered leading Clarice Vanborough by the hand. His singularly fair face and bright blue eyes formed a strong contrast to her dark, but delicate beauty. She was like Gilbert and her father in feature; she had the same inscrutable dark eyes and a cloud of dusky hair, but she was on a small scale; her head scarcely reached above Nigel's shoulder.

Geoffrey turned to her as she entered and hesitated as to what he should say. But Nigel had been preparing her while they crossed the hall together. She disengaged herself from him and laid both her hands in her brother's.

"We believe in you, Geoffrey," she said quietly.

"Bless you for it, my darling. I don't ask you to believe in me, you know," he added, inconsequently.

"You never ask anything for yourself—not even trust," said Clarice, smiling a little, and leaning against his shoulder. "But we shall give it you."

"Don't you think you had better hear Sir Wilfred's story first?" said Geoffrey.

"I shall have to hear something of it, I suppose."

"It is not necessary that you should believe it," said Nigel.

"Dear Clarice, I can't tell you much," Geoffrey continued, sadly. "I simply will not explain certain points which constitute evidence against me. I prefer not to tell you whether I am guilty or innocent. The evidence is overwhelming; you must draw your own conclusions." He put her away from him as he spoke and folded his arms. "It is a sad story, and a bad one. I cannot say that I am—blameless."

His voice dropped—his eyes sank. For a moment the three were silent. Nigel's face betrayed no sign of

emotion—it was cool and careless as usual ; but his left hand suddenly closed upon a hollow metal pen-holder with which he had been playing for a minute or two, closed upon it so tightly that the veins upon his hand stood out in high relief and the knuckles turned white. A quick red rose to Clarice's cheek—she breathed hurriedly once or twice, and then turned very pale. The tears stood in her large dark eyes as she stretched out her hands once more to her brother.

"Geoffrey," she said, "I don't think I could believe that you have committed an act of dishonesty if the whole world rose up and told me so. I think I should not believe you even against yourself."

Nigel Tremaine put down the pen-holder and smiled. He had crushed the pretty toy beyond repair, and never looked at it again.

"We three against the world," he said, almost gaily. "Never fear, Geoffrey, we shall right you yet."

"God forbid!" said Geoffrey, with a start and a look so like horror that even Nigel stood amazed. Then, more slowly, and with great earnestness: "Bear me witness, you two who trust me, that I declare most solemnly that I have no desire to justify myself. In as far as evidence proves me guilty I am willing to bear the punishment. Remember that if you try to investigate the matter further you will only do harm to myself, to yourselves, and to others. Promise me to attempt nothing of the kind, Clarice."

"Don't, Clarice," cried Nigel, audaciously. "Promises are very awkward things sometimes."

Clarice looked at him, then at her brother, and smiled. Clearly she was not inclined to promise anything of which Nigel did not approve.

"You make my burden the heavier," said Geoffrey, with a faint sigh.

"No," said his friend, affectionately, "we only do not pledge ourselves to refrain from lightening it when we see occasion to do so."

One more question was asked by Clarice—"Does Gilbert know?"

"We have not told him yet."

"Oh, Geoffrey! How distressed he will be by all this trouble."

"Yes," said Geoffrey, with curious, passive gentleness. "I think he will be distressed." But the look of pain upon his face deepened so greatly that Clarice could not bear to say another word.

The two men sat smoking together until late, talking over Geoffrey's prospects and plans. Tremaine referred to his proposition of going abroad; Vanborough told him he ought not to leave his home and property. "Do you think Clarice would like it?" he said at last.

"Yes," said Nigel, "under the circumstances I think she would."

And then the question dropped, for Geoffrey began to speak of the Argentine Government, and of the land there granted to colonists, which formed a fruitful topic of discussion.

But for Tremaine's help, Geoffrey told himself afterwards that at this period he would have gone to utter ruin. It was Tremaine who set him free from various embarrassments with creditors, made him decide upon South America as the place where he was most likely to succeed, and interested himself about the requisite outfit, and the sale of his chargers. Vanborough remonstrated in vain. "My dear fellow," Nigel said, "if you won't treat me as Clarice's prospective husband—which she has half promised to constitute me in good time—do at any rate treat me as a friend. I am only doing what you might have expected Gilbert to do—if he were fit for it."

"I shall never be able to repay you, Nigel. I shall not inherit Charnwood, you know."

"I don't want repayment. But how about Charnwood? Isn't it entailed? I thought it could not be alienated without your consent."

"I gave my consent."

Nigel drew a long inner breath. "Good heavens!" he said, in a half whisper, and then was silent.

"It will benefit Clarice," said Vanborough.

"In that case," said Nigel coolly, after a little pause, "we may consider ourselves quits."

"Exactly so."

And then the two friends smiled at each other, and said no more about money.

Gilbert and his wife had gone down to Charnwood. Geoffrey made no attempt to communicate with them. Nigel Tremaine sought out the younger brother, and told him his own views concerning Geoffrey's present position, but the young man refused to discuss the subject. Clarice wrote that she had been forbidden to mention Geoffrey's name, and when Nigel called again he was refused admittance. Sir Wilfred transacted all business with his elder son through the medium of Mr. Pengelly, his solicitor, and, when once he met Geoffrey at the very door of the London office, refused to acknowledge the younger man's grave, courteous, and silent salutation.

His debts paid, his commission resigned, his passage taken for Buenos Ayres, Geoffrey had yet one more task to accomplish. On his last night in England he travelled down to Charnwood alone. He took one last kiss from Clarice at their mother's grave, one last look at the shadowy groves and grey walls of Charnwood. And it was to Clarice's care that he confided a letter which she was to place in Gilbert's hands, at such time as he should be alone and she saw fit.

"Don't let anyone else see it," he said. "It is my last farewell," And Clarice promised that Gilbert should receive it safely.

Then Geoffrey pursued his way through the village to Darenths' farm. Here a stolid labourer, with a scythe over his shoulder, like old Time, told him all he wanted to know.

"Mistress Joan, she was away tending the sick folk still. They was mending noicely, thanks to her. Noa, she hadn't been h'll that he'd heern tell of. She was comin' back next week. An' Luke was away; gone to Afriky, or some such parts as them."

As soon as the sun was down he stood by Spence's cottage. One of the windows had been left open for coolness. Someone was reading aloud; was it Joan's voice he heard? Geoffrey crept nearer.

Yes, Joan was reading in her deep musical voice;

reading the Bible to one of her patients. Geoffrey fancied that her voice was less calm than usual; there was a pathetic cadence in the tone, a sighing utterance of the words, as if she had recently been weeping. He listened beneath the window for a few moments, then moved away with a heavy sigh. "Good-bye, Joan," he muttered, half aloud. "I wonder if you would be sorry if you knew."

He plucked a sprig of sweetbriar that grew beside the door, and placed it carefully in his pocket-book. He noticed, as he turned to go, that his watch-chain had been caught by one of the thorny stems, and he spent a minute or two in disentangling it. Then he went on his way to the railway station, and said a last good-bye to Charnwood.

Early next morning Joan came out to breathe the fresh, sweet air, and fetch water from the spring. Her face was paler and thinner than of old; her eyelids were slightly reddened, as though she had passed part of the night in tears. But although she turned one wistful glance towards Charnwood Manor, she did not loiter on her way. With firm strong hand she filled the pails, placed the yoke over her shoulders, and returned to the cottage. And there, in pausing to open the door, her eye was attracted by something bright that glittered beneath the sweetbriar bush. She stooped and picked it up. As she held it in her hand, a flood of colour rushed to the very roots of her hair, and her eyes once more grew dim. Where had she seen that little, worn, gold coin before? It was one that used to hang on Geoffrey Vanborough's watch-chain, one that he had once wanted to give her in remembrance of himself. It was not beneath the sweetbriar last night; of that she was sure. Had he been near her, and she had not known? She pressed her lips to the coin and kissed it passionately, then cried a little in a dumb, grieved way as she went about her daily work. She would take the coin to Miss Clarice as soon as she was free to leave the cottage, and in the meantime she was glad to feel that she had something that had once been his.

Geoffrey Vanborough did not discover his loss until next day, when he had embarked with all his goods on

board the vessel bound for Buenos Ayres. Then he remembered the fact of his being held fast for a moment by the watch-chain and sweetbriar, and wondered whether she would find the little coin at the doorstep, and know that he had been there.

He was standing on the deck at sunset, watching the shores of England die away into purple twilight, when someone spoke in his ear.

"A pity we can't see it to the very last, isn't it?" said a voice he knew.

Geoffrey started away a few steps. "Nigel!" he said, in a tone of astonishment not unmingled with anger, "how did you come here?"

"In the same way that you did," said Nigel, enjoying his friend's mystification with a sparkle of fun in his blue eyes. "And for the same purpose. I am bound for La Plata, like you."

"This is absurd. What did Mrs. Tremaine say—and Clarice? Did they know?"

"Of course. They were in the plot. I should have told you, but you grew so restive at the thought of dragging me away from my native soil, at last I did not like to mention my intention. Don't be afraid; I shall not stay long with you—just long enough to see you settled, and to find out for myself what South American life is like, and then I shall take a report of your welfare to Clarice. Now, why should you shake hands with me at this juncture? If you had done it two minutes ago I might have taken it as a welcome; but then you looked ready to knock me down. Have a cigar."

Geoffrey tried another remonstrance, but was cut short by a fresh volley of whimsical sentences which, he knew well, were intended to stop all argument. So he gave up the attempt in despair.

"I have another treasure for you," Nigel continued presently. "You wouldn't try to find a man to go with you as a helper, servant, fellow-labourer, you know, so I took one into my service in the hope that I might transfer him in time to yours. You know him already."

Nigel looked at his friend rather sharply as he answered.

"Luke Darenth," he said.

Away went Geoffrey's cigar into the sea. Then he plunged his hands into the pockets of his great coat and stood silent.

"I suppose you think I have taken an unwarrantable liberty," said Tremaine, in his lightest manner, "but you will find out the wisdom of my proceedings in time. He is honest, faithful, trustworthy, and not without shrewdness. If he doesn't get on he can go back with me. But I'm merely assisting him to emigrate; he may get land for himself as well as you, and be as independent."

"I make no objections," said Geoffrey.

"Don't you? Oh, well, if you will make no further ones, I will tell you the whole history of his coming with me, from beginning to end. It has a fine feudal flavour about it, I must say."

They seated themselves on a coil of rope apart from the other passengers, and there Nigel began his tale.

"I went up to the Hillside Farm about a fortnight ago, simply on a matter of business, and there I sat talking for some time to the old man and his son. By-and-bye I noticed that they were leading the subject round to you. Were you going to be long away, and so on. I said you were going to America, and would probably make your fortune by sheep-farming, and then—as a pure joke, I assure you—said, 'You'd better come too, Luke. You're just the man Captain Vanborough wants to help him.'

"To my surprise they took the matter rather seriously.

"They began putting questions about the land and the sheep, and one or two about you. I think they had an idea that there was something unprecedented in the fact of their future baronet going out to earn his bread with his own hands. I rode off at last, and thought no more of the matter. But next day I was walking from Charnwood when I came to that lonely little cottage where they've had fever——"

"I know it," said Geoffrey abruptly.

"And there was my man in converse with one of the most beautiful women I ever saw—his sister. She had

been nursing these people through their illness, and her brother had come to consult her over the garden gate. She would not let him even enter the garden. The brother stopped me at once. 'If you'd please mention to my sister, sir,' he said, 'what you were saying to me the other night about Mr. Geoffrey, I should be glad.'

Vanborough had turned aside, so that his face was in shadow, but Nigel felt that he was listening intently.

"I repeated to the sister what I had said before, and then she said, 'Would my brother be of use to Mr. Geoffrey, sir?'

"Of great use, I told her. And then. 'Is he going out to a new country all alone?'

"I said I was going with him for a few weeks, and that if Luke cared to come with me and see whether he liked the place, he might do so. She turned to him then and said, with a curious sort of urgency—'You will go, won't you, Luke; and you'll serve him as our family has always served his family for generations back? It would never do for a Darenth to desert the Vanboroughs.' And, to cut a rather long story short, I thought the sentiment so pretty and deserving of encouragement that I looked after the fellow's outfit as well as my own, and brought him with me."

Geoffrey made no response at all. "Well," said Tremaine, after a pause, "I can't say that I see much gratitude to your loyal retainers."

"Retainers!" said Vanborough, impatiently. "They are not retainers of ours in any sense at all." Then, after a still longer pause, he continued in a low tone, "I'll tell you what that girl is—the best woman on earth, as well as the most beautiful, and the one whom I had asked to be my wife, not forty-eight hours before the—the crash came; and she rejected me."

"Rejected you?" said Tremaine, with a note of surprise in his voice. "That's odd."

"Why?"

"Because I could have sworn that if she cared for anybody she cared for you."

"Too late now," said Vanborough with a sigh.

"Not at all. Write to her."

"My dear Nigel," said Vanborough, very gently, "do you think I would ask any woman to share a dishonoured life like mine?"

Let us leave the great ship in mid-ocean, like a white-winged bird upon the deep, and turn again for a moment to the low-lying green groves of Charnwood. Here the interior of the old grey house seemed strangely wrapped in gloom. The white-haired father shut himself up and mourned or raged over his son's disgrace in bitter silence; the brother roamed the house and grounds like an unquiet spirit. Instinctively the two women of the household drew together, but never spoke to each other of all they hoped or feared for the future or the past.

Some days passed before Clarice found an opportunity of placing Geoffrey's letter in Gilbert's hands. He avoided her, and it was difficult to catch a moment when Merle was not at his side. But at last she found him alone in the gun-room, and gave him his little packet silently.

"What is it?" he said, trying to force it back upon her.

"A letter," Clarice answered. "I was to give it to you when you were quite alone."

His face blanched a little. "How did you get it?"

"Geoffrey left it for you. I saw him on the night before he sailed."

"What business had you to see him? You know that intercourse with him had been forbidden. You should respect your father's wishes," Gilbert spoke, savagely, but Clarice answered with a dangerous lighting of her eyes, which silenced him.

"I, at least, cannot give up my brother, and my brother's love, at my father's bidding."

Gilbert turned his back upon her with an impatient gesture. She left him alone.

Half-an-hour later Merle came into the house with her hands full of flowers, and, passing by the gun-room door, looked in to see if Gilbert were still there. There indeed he was, stretched upon the floor in one of the fainting fits the chance of which always made her so unwilling to leave him alone. A piece of paper was crushed in his hand, but as he recovered and was removed from the room it fell from

his nerveless fingers to the floor. One of the servants, a country girl who could not read, came in presently and began to rearrange the room, which had been disordered by Gilbert's attack and removal. The crumpled piece of paper fell into her hands.

At first she swept it carelessly into the dust-pan, then remembered that she had been told not to throw away paper, so rescued it with some haste and tore it accidentally in twain. Honest Betsy Blane stared at the torn fragments with a strong inclination to cry. The housekeeper had threatened her with dismissal lately for carelessness, and she would certainly enforce her threat if she found that Betsy had been tearing her master's papers. There was no fire, or into that the paper would have gone. She looked round for a place of concealment. A letter-case hung against the wall crammed with papers. Into its innermost recesses, behind half a dozen old circulars and envelopes, far out of sight, Betsy thrust the letter that Geoffrey had written to his brother. There it might lie for days and weeks, and even months; there indeed it might well stay until Time had done its mouldering work, and nothing would remain but two mildewed scraps of paper covered with illegible characters, or even a little heap of dust.

CHAPTER VII

HILLSIDE FARM

THE time came at length when Joan was free to go back to the farm. She quickened her steps as she neared the farmhouse door in the golden glow of an August evening. She found her father in the yard; he welcomed her tenderly, telling her that her brother had gone to spend the afternoon with Patty, and had not yet returned. The two wandered for a little time about the garden, talking of all that had occurred in Joan's absence; then, as the evening drew in, they entered the house, and the farmer seated himself in his arm-chair between the fireplace and the window.

The evening was beginning to fall, and the wind was rather cold ; he stirred the fire once or twice, and sent the bright flames leaping up the chimney. She had seated herself on a stool at her father's feet, and clasped her hands round his knees.

Darenth was silent for a minute or two, and rapped upon the arm of his chair uneasily. He was just about to speak when Joan rose from her seat with suddenly uplifted forefinger.

" Hark ! " she said. " Is not somebody knocking at the door ? "

She looked out into a twilight stillness, and between her and the golden sky stood the figure of a woman all in black.

Joan waited, but no words fell from the visitor's lips.

" Will you come in, ma'am ? " said the girl, respectfully. " Father's at home if you want to see him."

After a little hesitation the lady stepped forward. She had a tall, graceful figure, as could be seen in spite of her shrouding black draperies, and she carried a little bag upon her left arm. Reuben Darenth rose from his chair as she entered, and looked at her expectantly, his fine, grey, weather-beaten face taking on its shrewd business expression. But still the woman in black did not speak.

" Will you sit down, ma'am ? " said Joan, when the visitor raised her veil, and showed that the countenance beneath it was pale as death.

" Is your name Darenth ? " she said to Joan, as the girl waited before her.

" Yes. Would you like a glass of water ? " said Joan, fearing that the whiteness of lip and cheek was increasing, and making a step towards their guest's chair.

The woman shook her head. " You are like—very like," she murmured, devouring Joan with her eyes, while Reuben Darenth drew near with a dawning suspicion that the new-comer was mad. " Like—my mother," she said, with a sudden effort to speak intelligibly. And then she added, as if she wished to explain her words, " My mother's name was Elizabeth Darenth."

"Elizabeth Darenth?" said the farmer, his brow darkening. "What! My sister? She that ran away from home, and left her friends, and died——"

"Died of a broken heart," said the woman, steadily.

She would have risen to her feet, but Joan took her by the hands and looked into her face.

"And are you my cousin?" she said. "My cousin, come from France to see us? We are very glad to see you, cousin, and we hope you will be happy here."

Then, moved by the expression of the dark eyes that met hers, she stooped down and kissed her cousin on the forehead. "Father," she said, half-reproachfully, "won't you welcome my cousin to England, too?"

Reuben Darenth drew near, and somewhat reluctantly offered his hand. His niece rose to answer him.

"I am much obliged to you, sir," she said. "But I can prove that I am what I tell you. You see this bracelet; it was one my mother wore before she left Charnwood. You can question me, if you like. I know her history, and something of yours. I do not think," and she turned to Joan, with a singularly sweet but mournful smile, "that you would take me for an impostor."

"My father does not think so," said Joan, confidently. But her cousin went on, unheeding.

"I have had an unhappy life. My mother died of misery, sickening for her brother and her home. She did not name me Elizabeth," with a quick look at Reuben Darenth; "I am called Maddalena. I married, at five-and-twenty, a man younger than myself. A bad man. I led five miserable years with him."

She ceased and looked down at her hands, from which she had withdrawn the gloves. The wedding-ring hung loose upon the thin white finger.

"And now he is dead?" said Reuben, with a touch of sympathy.

She gave him a quick glance. "Yes," she said, "dead to me."

Reuben, with all his shrewdness, could at times be strangely obtuse. He did not consider what the last three words might mean; he accepted the statement of her husband's death in all good faith. But Joan was

quick of discernment. It seemed to her that this woman's trouble was greater than that of death.

"And so, you have come to your friends in England. Well, niece," said Reuben Darenth, as if he were now admitting her claim upon him for the first time, "you are kindly welcome. As long as I have a house over my head, it will be your shelter if you want it. I am glad to make acquaintance with my sister's child. And so she was not happy—poor girl—poor Lizzie!"

Suddenly he turned away and went out of the room, as if he could bear the scene no longer. They heard his steps go slowly up the wooden stair; they heard him enter an upper room, and shut the door. And then Maddalena, who had sunk back in her chair with a look of utter exhaustion, turned her heavy eyes on Joan.

"He is good," she said, "although he looks stern. And you—you look good, too. You will not mind my troubling you a little while? I am not come for long, but I wanted to see the place where my mother lived before I went to her. Because, you know," she continued, while her purple-veined lids seemed ready to close upon her eyes with very weariness, "I have only come here to die."

"Oh, no, no," said Joan, tenderly, "you must not talk of dying yet. We shall soon make you well. You have had great trouble, poor soul, and you are weary of your life. You will be better and stronger soon."

She put her arms round the stranger's shoulders and drew her close to her bosom. For a moment the desolate woman tried to free herself, then yielded to the gentle pressure, and burst into a passion of tears.

"Yes, yes," she sobbed, "you are right. I have had great trouble—great trouble. I have given up all I cared for—I am weary of everything. I do not even want to find him now. Only let me stay here and rest for a little while before I die."

Joan held her for a few minutes until she grew calmer, then kissed her again upon the forehead.

"You are not like a young girl," said her cousin, looking up into the grave, beautiful face above her with a sort of wonder, "you are like a mother—you know how to love. I never had a sister; will you be a sister to me now?"

Before they separated for the night the guest said, with the same look of wonder, added to a new and wistful truthfulness, "You are strange people; you have never asked my married name. I will tell it to you—it is Vallor. My husband was called Constantine Vallor."

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE FOREST

A SOLITARY horse and rider had been overtaken by darkness in a South American forest.

Geoffrey Vanborough had been on a little expedition to the post, a trifling matter of thirty miles or so on horseback, to Buenos Ayres and back. He was now returning to the camp where he had left his friends, whence they intended to move on their way to the *saladeros*, or slaughter-house, belonging to the manager of the large estate on which Geoffrey had engaged himself as assistant, to which they were now driving a great herd of cattle from the plains. Once away on the Pampas, he would have few opportunities of sending letters to England or anywhere else, and he had been the bearer on this occasion of letters from Luke Darenth and Nigel Tremaine to their respective friends, as well as of his own to his sister—his only correspondent. They had been a very short time as yet in the Argentine Republic, and they were still "new hands," but the three were already popular with their rough comrades, and Nigel was attaining such skill in the use of a lasso that he declared English sport to be very tame in comparison with South American.

Geoffrey pulled up and glanced round him, mentally accusing himself of complete imbecility. There would be little danger or inconvenience in camping out for the night, but he was exceedingly hungry, and had no provisions of any kind with him. And as he looked round him in some vexation of spirit he saw in the distance a faint, steady light, which probably streamed from the window of some *peon's* mud hut or Indian cabin. Thither

Geoffrey turned his horse's head, mustering his best Spanish—which was still very uncertain—for the occasion.

There was indeed a small house, roughly constructed, as he guessed, but evidently inhabited. The night was so dark that he could not even distinguish the door, so he drew rein and called out the usual salutation :

“Ave Maria !”

There was a moment's silence, then a window seemed to be thrown open, but the light behind it was extinguished. A pistol shot suddenly broke the silence of the night, and a bullet passed so close to Vanborough's face that he heard it whizz.

Now this was a clear infringement of the rules of hospitality, and Geoffrey had a right to be angry. He had his revolver ready, and might have used it but for a sound that suddenly reached his ear. It was a wailing cry of a woman or a child in pain or fear. His hand dropped, he could not make up his mind to fire into the house whence that sound proceeded. He uttered another angry protest, heard the window shut down precipitately, and found himself again in silence. No light, no sound, issued from the desolate-looking little house.

He went a few paces onward, then dismounted and tied his horse to a tree. He could not find his way in the black darkness; he might as well wait for morning and see what manner of people were those who tried to shoot a lonely stranger at their door. He thought it improbable that they would try to shoot him in broad daylight; still he knew that his delay might be considered imprudent, and was deliberating, as he lay upon the ground, whether it would not be well to put a further distance between himself and his foes, when slumber overtook him, and he slept till daybreak.

In the morning he looked to see whether his pistols were in working order, left his horse fastened, and walked to the house to reconnoitre. It had all the appearance of an ordinary settler's cabin not in very good repair; the door was open, and smoke curling up from the hole which served as a chimney. Vanborough advanced to the door and looked in. An old Indian woman, hideously tattooed, wrapped in a filthy blanket, was sitting over

the fire, stirring some concoction of herbs in an iron pot. She looked at the stranger with no sign of fear or surprise upon her wrinkled, copper-coloured face; she did not even cease stirring her mess of herbs upon the fire, but she uttered a sound that was neither a call nor a cry, an inarticulate utterance that had the effect of summoning another person from the interior of the house. The man who entered was, as Vanborough rightly guessed, the person who discharged his pistol at random on the previous night. He now bowed politely, and asked in fluent Spanish how he might serve the distinguished stranger who was honouring his poor dwelling with a visit.

Geoffrey was repelled by his appearance. The man looked about thirty-five years of age; he was rather below the middle height, and wonderfully lean and lithe in every limb. His complexion was pale, his eyes were dark and well-shaped, but with restless, darting eyeballs, his nose was hooked and thin, his hair, very faintly streaked with grey, hung in tangled curls to his eyebrows and over the back of his neck, the lower part of his face was covered by a stubbly undergrowth of black beard. The fine grain of the yellowish skin, and beautiful modelling of the long, supple fingers, made his hands the most noticeable part of his personal appearance. He wore the usual poncho and slouched hat of a South American; but he was even more fully armed than a settler usually is, for he carried in his belt a perfect armoury of bowie-knives, as well as the customary revolver.

Geoffrey allowed the shining tip of his own revolver to become visible, and returned the man's polite greeting with some stiffness.

"Is it always your practice, señor," he inquired, "to fire your pistols as a salutation to an advancing guest after nightfall?"

He saw something like a quiver of alarm pass over the man's pale face.

"*Madre de Dios!* Can it be possible that I was so unfortunate, señor, as to mistake the arrival of a friend for the band of brigands which I was hourly expecting?"

"I do not know for whom you mistook me," said Van-

borough, "but I would not advise you to adopt that line of conduct on all occasions. It might lead to awkward results."

He spoke with a resolute gleam of the eye which seemed to cow the man at once. He stammered out a dozen apologies, the sense of which Geoffrey could but imperfectly follow, and entreated the stranger to sit down and share his scanty meal with him in token of forgiveness.

As Geoffrey was exceedingly hungry, he had no scruple in accepting the invitation, and therefore sat down on a pile of dressed skins, and smoked the pipe of peace with his host. The fare was good and abundant, and the visitor did ample justice to it.

"You are an Englishman," said the host, suddenly quitting the Spanish tongue and speaking English with remarkable fluency. "I thought so from your dress and equipments; not from your manner of speech—oh, no—I have been in England myself."

"Indeed! Long ago?" Vanborough asked carelessly.

"Eight—ten—twelve years ago. I do not love England. I shall not visit it again."

"What part of England do you know? London, I suppose?"

"Yes, I have seen London. But I know other places—Bristol, Liverpool, and some little places—little 'country places,' you call them, in the east part of England. Do you know the east part of England, too?"

"Yes, I know it," said Geoffrey, idly watching the blue wreaths of smoke as they curled away from his mouth into the sunny air. But his eyes came back to the man's face with an expression of astonishment, quickly veiled, as his interlocutor continued.

"Do you know a place called Charnwood?"

"A little," said Geoffrey, calmly. But his look of amaze and momentary pause had not passed unnoticed.

"And you know, perhaps—or know about—a family called Darent—Darenth—some name of that kind, is there not?"

Geoffrey hesitated a moment. "Perhaps I do," he said tranquilly. "May I ask you, before going any further, whether you are a friend of that family?"

"A friend? Oh, yes," said the man, smiling, while his eyes glittered in a peculiarly unpleasant way, "and more—a connection. It is connection, you call it, I think? No blood relationship, but a bond, a tie. It was my brother who lost his wife in the shipwreck of the schooner *Mary Jane* in the year 1870. She was the daughter of Elizabeth Darenth, who ran away from Charnwood with a Spaniard, one Carlo Perez, and died of grief—like a fool—when she found that he was making a fortune at roulette. The child, Maddalena, got all his money, and married my brother Constantine."

"And was shipwrecked?" said Geoffrey, incautiously betraying his interest in these details. "What became of her husband?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"Señor, how can I tell? Some say he was also drowned; some say he was killed in an affair in Mexico. I never saw him since my boyhood. His name was Vallor—Constantine Vallor—you know the name?"

A singular watchfulness crept into his long, dark eyes as he waited for Geoffrey's reply.

"No," said Geoffrey, "I never heard it."

"Better so," said the Spaniard, smiling a little; "it might not please you to remember his name."

"What is your name?"

"Vallor, señor, naturally; but my baptismal name is Sebastian. I was my brother's junior by some years. If ever I go to England again I shall visit Charnwood and take the account of the Señora Maddalena's death, to her relatives. She has relatives left no doubt?"

"Probably," said Vanborough, beginning to think he had said enough.

"I met my sister-in-law once," continued Sebastian Vallor. "She was then on her way to England. She told me of Charnwood, of the Darenth family, and of the great lords that lived close by. There was Señor Wilfredo, whom her mother had no reason to love. He persecuted——"

"Sir Wilfred Vanborough is my father," said Geoffrey, quickly and haughtily.

The man's eyes flashed with a new expression of gratified cunning.

"Pardon, señor, I was not aware. I will be silent."

And he made a parade of sudden reserve and respect which galled Geoffrey almost more than the insinuation had done.

"It is time for me to be going," he said, disliking his host's society the more he saw of it. "I must wish you good-day. Many thanks for your hospitality," and, as if by accident, he dropped a gold piece on the ground. The Spaniard did not seem to notice the action, but a slight smile curled the corners of his thin mouth, and his foot stole gradually to the place where the coin was lying, and covered it. Geoffrey was satisfied. To offer payment openly might have been treated as an insult, yet to go away without making any was impossible. Now they were quits. But matters took an unexpected turn.

"I am going your way," said Vallor. "Allow me to accompany you, señor. I will but speak to Juanita and then return. I have heard of your camp, and shall be glad to arrive there in such good company."

He brought out his horse—everybody rides in South America—and to Vanborough's disgust, insisted on accompanying him.

It seemed that Vallor had some acquaintances in the band of drovers and cattle-dealers now on their way to the farm on which Geoffrey was working. With these he made himself at home, and Geoffrey, glad to be rid of him, rejoined Tremaine. The friends concurred in desiring to keep Darenth out of the way of his doubtful "connection," and they contented themselves with giving him the outline of Vallor's story, and warning him against pursuing the acquaintance. Luke took the matter very soberly.

"I've heard tell of my Aunt 'Lizabeth," he said. "They say that our Joan be the very moral of her. Joan, she was always set on hearing what became of Cousin Madelin. She'll be sorry she was drowned." And then he deliberately walked off to accost Señor Sebastian Vallor, and to make inquiries for himself respecting his lost cousin.

Sebastian Vallor had been hanging about the camp for some time, earning his living in precarious ways. Occasionally he prescribed for various diseases, and seemed to have a good deal of knowledge of herbs, acquired, perhaps, among the Indians, with whom he said he had lived for many months at a time. His cleverness in card games brought him, at first, into much repute, but when he was found to win steadily, the settlers became slow to play with him, and the gains thus made rapidly melted away. However, there was always plenty of work to be done, and ready hospitality extended to a stranger; so that, after all, Vallor was not badly off.

It was noticed that Sebastian Vallor was found several times in the vicinity of the tent occupied by Vanborough and Tremaine, during their absence; and a certain settler, who was acting one day as cook for the community, felt it his duty to warn him that, "if he didn't give them premises a wide berth for the future he would know the feel of a bullet afore long, or his name wasn't Jonathan Elkins." After which remark, Sebastian Vallor absented himself from the camp altogether, and was supposed to have gone back to his lonely hut in the forest at some miles' distance. And therefore Vanborough told his friend, who as yet had observed Vallor only in the most cursory manner possible, that the Spaniard had finally quitted the little settlement.

In the dusk of the evening, when Nigel and Geoffrey were both out of doors, a keen observer might have distinguished a dark form lying almost motionless upon the ground near their tent. A few log cabins had been hastily run up for the use of the cattle drivers when they came that way, but Vanborough preferred the free ventilation and portability of his canvas dwelling, although he was warned that it was more easily accessible to thieves. He was strong and well-armed, and had no fear. And yet there might have been room for fear in the mind of anyone who had descried the stealthy approach of that dark figure through the grass. It writhed itself along by slow degrees, like a snake, and finally reached the very edge of the tent, where it lay still for a long time. When night had fallen it wormed itself just inside the tent, and lay hidden in the

darkness between the canvas and a rude wooden box which stood at one side of the tent. Thus the man, whoever he was, lay not a yard from Nigel Tremaine's hammock, and close to the box which he was in the habit of using as a table, on which he sometimes carelessly deposited his watch and pocket-book, side by side with his revolver.

It was with this dangerous visitant crouched within four feet of him that Nigel Tremaine that night opened a conversation with Geoffrey. The lights were out, and Vanborough was just sinking into slumber, when his friend's voice aroused him.

"Geoffrey, old fellow, I'm sorry to disturb you, but as I can never get a quiet word with you in the daytime, I must ask you to listen to me now."

"Say on," said Vanborough, sleepily. "You wouldn't be so ready to talk if you had been as many hours in the saddle as I have to-day. I'm afraid I shall snore in the middle of the conversation, that is all."

"Not when you hear what I have to say. I want to talk about your home people."

Geoffrey's voice took a wakeful tone at once.

"What is it? I'm listening."

"I'm not going to pretend to be disinterested," said Tremaine, deliberately. "My words are spoken from purely selfish motives, and you must not mind if they sound harsh. You know how deep my attachment to Clarice is?"

"Yes."

"You know that I was denied admittance to your father's house a fortnight before I came away?"

"Unhappily I do."

"I expected Sir Wilfred's soreness about our friendship and my expedition with you to die away in a short time, but I am sorry to say that it seems to have become exasperated. I hear from Clarice that she is now forbidden to go to Beechfield to see my mother and the girls—or to write to me any longer."

"She never told me that," said Geoffrey, sitting up, with something like a groan.

"Of course I shall demand an explanation when I go back."

"You ought never to have come."

"Yes, I ought. I don't think your father will hold out against both Clarice and myself. The fact that makes me most anxious, and that has very considerably astonished me, is that Gilbert takes the same view as Sir Wilfred, and opposes our engagement with all his might."

Geoffrey was so still for a moment that Nigel could not even hear him breathe. Then he drew a long sigh, as of one utterly heart-sick and weary. "Well," he said, "is there anything in that to surprise you?"

"Yes," Nigel answered, emphatically, "very much. I am lost in amazement at Gilbert's action in the matter."

"I wish you would let it rest."

"I can't and won't let it rest. Do you ever let it rest? You know that it haunts you night and day. This is the last time we may be able to talk the matter out. Hitherto I have respected your silence. Now I am going back to encounter the obstacles which between us we have managed to raise up in the way of my engagement to Clarice. For her sake and mine you ought to help me. The easiest way of removing the difficulty would be to clear yourself of suspicion. And I think I have a right to ask a question or two."

"Dear old boy, I wish you would hold your tongue. You make matters worse, not better. Do be quiet and go to sleep."

"Not till I have told you a story which justifies my interference. Now don't interrupt me with any such frivolous statement as that you know the tale already, or the parties concerned. Remember you have not heard the comments on it that late years have suggested to me. There were once two brothers, boys of eleven and sixteen. They were at a tutor's house together. One day there was a great row because pipes and spirits and various materials for feasting had been smuggled into one of the bedrooms. Everybody in the house denied any knowledge of it—be quiet, I say, and listen—until damning evidence against one Mr. G. Vanborough was found in the shape of a label tied round the neck of a bottle, and addressed to him. Mr. Geoffrey Vanborough was accordingly accused, condemned and expelled—or would have been expelled, but for the

officiousness of a friend who had looked hard into the face of G. Vanborough the younger, saw something there that the general public did not see, and extracted the truth from him. G stands for Gilbert as well as Geoffrey, you see. The elder brother had been fool enough—yes, *fool* enough—to shield the younger at his own expense, on the ground that he was young, lame, delicate—Heaven knows what besides!—and forgot that his over softness and tenderness to the lad might hinder any chance of his growing up brave and honest in after life. In my opinion you did Gilbert much greater harm by trying to protect him from the consequences of his own wrong-doing than when you were the innocent cause of his lameness. There; I have done. History repeats itself; that is all.”

“You are going too far, Tremaine.”

“You told me so on that former occasion, I recollect.”

“Don’t, Nigel; for God’s sake, don’t. You make me sorry that I ever sought you out on that unhappy night last summer. Don’t say another word or we shall quarrel.”

“Vanborough, your love for your brother Gilbert makes a perfect fool of you. Well, what are you going to do?”

“Going out. I’ll have no more of this. I can’t stand it.”

“Lie down again. I have nothing more to say to-night.”

“No,” said Geoffrey, who had risen from his bed; “I must get a breath of fresh air. I am stifled.”

He lifted up the flap of the tent door and disappeared.

Nigel sighed as he turned upon his pillow.

And all the time the dark figure of a man, with ears on the alert and nerves a-strain, had crouched three feet from Nigel’s head and listened to every word.

Geoffrey had become almost sleepy when his attention was aroused by a sudden cry which seemed to proceed from the tent. He started up, listened, and then rushed towards it at full speed. It was Nigel’s voice that had called him, and as he approached he could hear the noise of a struggle, and then the report of a pistol, which roused the whole camp.

He entered the tent just in time to hinder the escape of a man who was crawling away under the canvas with a knife in his hand. Geoffrey seized him by the throat and disarmed him, knowing as he did so that the would-be thief and assassin was Sebastian Vallor. And when he had secured him he turned to the floor, where Nigel Tremaine lay, the still smoking pistol dropping from his hand, the dark blood oozing slowly from more than one ugly wound and staining all his arm and side, a deathly pallor upon his lifeless face.

CHAPTER IX

THE VENGEANCE OF THE CAMP

THERE was a tumult of words and voices, a crowding of angry faces round the entrance to the tent, a storm of curses on the prisoner's head. Vallor lay on the ground, bound hand and foot, looking ghastly. It seemed to him that his last hour had surely come. If any man present chose to lift his derringer and put a bullet through the culprit's head, no stigma of blame would attach to the perpetrator of such an act of summary justice. But this act was not performed. The men left it to Vanborough, the natural avenger of his friend's blood, and Vanborough was too much absorbed by the sight of Nigel's danger to have thought for anyone but him.

An old and experienced colonist, who was in charge of the expedition, and well versed in the treatment of accidents, came and knelt down at Tremaine's side, felt his pulse, and raised his eyelid with one finger and thumb. "Only a faint," he said, trenchantly, "he'll come round." Then he looked at the circle of faces, some scowling, some curious, some sympathetic, pointed to the door and uttered one expressive monosyllable :

"Git !"

In two seconds the tent was clear.

"We'll keep him till you come out, cap'en," said one of the men to Vanborough, as he assisted in removing the

captive; "darn me, if anyone but you has the right to shoot him."

"Keep him safe, then," Geoffrey answered, rather grimly.

At that moment he felt himself quite prepared to shoot the murderer with his own hand, should Nigel die.

The manager's rough surgery soon showed, however, that the wounds were not quite as serious as they looked. The knife had penetrated his side very deeply, and his arm was severely wounded, but it did not appear that the injury was a mortal one, as Geoffrey had feared at first.

"Can't we get a doctor?" Vanborough asked, by-and-bye.

"None nearer than Buenos Ayres. Eight or ten dollars a mile."

"That doesn't matter. I'd better go myself, perhaps. Or shall I get Darenth to go?"

The squatter thought that "one of the boys" would do the business better than Darenth, and that Vanborough himself should stay by his friend.

"If he wakes up and sees yer gone, he may be jest a trifle onreasonable. Sick folk often air, any way. I calc'late, too, that Hiram Gregg knows Buenos Ayres more closely'n you, or Darenth neither. If he rides Black Pete he'll be there an' back like a flash o' greased lightning. I'll go and find him."

Geoffrey was left alone with his friend. The bleeding from the wound had hitherto continued, but now he thought he saw signs of its becoming allayed. In a little time Nigel opened his eyes, fixed them earnestly upon Vanborough, and smiled.

"All right," said Geoffrey, softly. "Don't talk; you've been hurt, but you'll soon be better."

Nigel glanced down at his arm and side, seemed to recollect something, and was silent. The kindly settler now returned, and motioned Geoffrey to the door of the tent, where Hiram Gregg, the man guaranteed to go to Buenos Ayres and back "like a flash of greased lightning," was already in waiting. Vanborough had to furnish him with a part of the money which the doctor would require

as a fee ; some portion of it, he was told, being often paid beforehand in sign of good faith.

Hiram Gregg, who, like the old colonist, was a North American, waited a moment to add, in an odd, unmodulated voice, which it was vain to hush :

"The boys is gettin' wild out thyar. Sez they want t' kna wot yer gwine ter dew with Vallor. Sez they'll lynch him ef yer not round soon to put a bullet inter him yerself. They 'low yer may as well hev the satisfaction o' dewing it with yer own derringer."

"I'll come out," said Vanborough. He was hardly conscious of what he meant to do—whether he should protect the criminal or allow "the boys" to take vengeance upon him—but he strode back into the tent for his own pistol, as a precautionary measure. And there his eyes encountered Nigel's again ; Nigel's blue eyes fixed upon him with something of their old keen brightness.

"Geoffrey," he said.

"Don't speak, don't talk," said Vanborough, hurriedly. "You will hurt yourself."

"Was it Vallor?" the wounded man persisted.

"Yes." And Geoffrey's brow grew dark.

"Remember—I should not have been hurt—but for my resistance—don't let them—kill the fellow."

Vanborough shrugged his shoulders. He was not disposed to interfere in behalf of the man who had half-killed Tremaine. But Nigel spoke again, with the gasping impatience of weakness.

"Look after it, will you? Don't let him be killed—on my account."

"All right. Do keep quiet, Nigel. I'll do all I can."

And Geoffrey sallied forth, very doubtful as to his line of conduct. No sooner was he outside the tent than he was beset by buzzing groups of men, anxious to see what he would do, and to know what he wished them to do. With the rough honour of comradeship, they had not touched a hair of their prisoner's head ; they had left the task of vengeance for Geoffrey's hand. They had already grown fond of the three Englishmen, who seemed united by a stronger tie than the one generally admitted amongst fellow-settlers in that part of the world. And they were

quite prepared to see Geoffrey Vanborough do justice on the man who had stabbed his friend.

Their surprise was not great then when Vanborough, seeing that he was expected to do or say something definite, sprang upon an oak stump and made them a short speech. Vallor lay on the ground at some distance, and whether he heard or did not hear the words that Vanborough spoke could not be told.

"Gentlemen," said Geoffrey, who was not unpractised in the art of addressing a body of men, and had learnt on parade how to make his voice heard, "gentlemen, my friend, Tremaine, is now conscious, and is likely to do well. I have sent to Buenos Ayres for a doctor. As regards the man Vallor, I must say that a short time ago I should have felt much pleasure in shooting him." Applause—suppressed, however, for fear of disturbing the wounded man's repose. "But—much as I think he deserves punishment—I have passed my word not to shoot him, and to do my best to prevent your shooting him also. What do you think has induced me to give that promise? Who, but the man whom yonder ruffian stabbed in the arm and side—my friend, Tremaine!"

There was no applause this time, but a murmur, half-admiring, half-savage. Then questions, hisses, cries—"We're not safe if a thief like that is to be let off." "What did he do that for?" "What a darned fool he must be!"

"He says," continued Vanborough, still dominating the passions of the little crowd by the command of his resonant voice and stately, soldierly-like presence, "he says that the man wanted to rob, not to kill; that he would not have attacked him if he—Tremaine himself—had not fired at him first, and that therefore he is not to be treated as if he was a murderer. Now, whether Tremaine is right or wrong I don't say. I only say that it will be a shame if I have to go back on my word to him while he's lying there helpless. I promised I'd save the man's life, and I'll defend him to the last, because I promised it; but I'd sooner you kicked him out of camp with a recommendation not to come back again. Now, whoever shoots Vallor will have me to deal with afterwards,

and with Tremaine, as soon as he gets better, after me; and with Darenth after both of us. We three are on the same side."

He had spoken loudly, almost roughly, using tone and words most likely to impress the men's minds, and his loyalty to his friend's wishes and to the promise he had given extorted from them a sullen submission. They muttered that it was no business of theirs any way; and if Vanborough and Tremaine and Darenth liked to be such cursed fools, it was their own look-out, and not that of the settlers now in the camp.

The matter was accordingly allowed to drop. Vallor was hustled about, kicked, and generally maltreated to some extent by his rough captors; finally, however, he was led out of the camp, and dismissed with the intimation that if he showed his face there again he would be shot—without trial.

But as he was marched away he passed Geoffrey Vanborough, and favoured him with a look expressive of as much malevolence as lips and eyes could well betray.

"You have not heard of me for the last time yet," he said. "I shall have more to say to you when we meet again."

And then he was silenced and thrust forward, and the camp was rid of him at last.

It was between four and five o'clock in the afternoon when Hiram Gregg at last put his head into Vanborough's tent.

"I've come, cap'en," he said. The title of "Captain" had been learnt from Luke Darenth, and was applied to Vanborough by all his rough comrades.

"At last," said Geoffrey, rising and turning to the entrance. "I thought your horse was a fast one."

"There ain't no faster than Black Pete," said Hiram, sullenly, "but you can't allers find a doctor at hum when you want him, can you? I had to wait about a mighty long spell, and arter all he didn't come himself, but sent a friend as was staying along of him."

"A friend? Is he a doctor, too?"

"Well, I calc'late he must be. He's mighty peart and noticing-like. Told me more about the perrairies than

I ever knew," said Hiram, with an air of mingled disdain and superior wisdom.

Geoffrey smiled. "Where is he? Let him come in."

"He's here," said Hiram, standing aside; and then the doctor entered.

A man of thirty or thirty-five years; lean, wiry, energetic-looking; not an ounce of superfluous fat anywhere; a keen, dark, resolute, masterful face, with very little hair upon it, vivacious dark eyes, a long nose, thin lips, a good, broad forehead and square jaw; these were the outward characteristics of the new doctor. He had one or two cases in his hand, and a wallet at his side. He was dressed in grey linen, and he wore a Panama hat.

"This is my patient, I suppose," he said, after the briefest possible greeting to Geoffrey. "Ah!" And his eyes ran rapidly over the details of the scene before him, seeming to note everything in sight—from Nigel Tremaine's white, exhausted face, and Vanborough's grave features, to the smallest article of camp furniture. Then he devoted his attention exclusively to his patient, and scarcely spoke again, save to issue one or two peremptory orders to Geoffrey, until his examination of the patient and the dressing of his wounds were completed. But Tremaine and Vanborough speedily became aware that no tyro in surgical art was before them. The light, skilful touch, the calm certainty of every movement, inspired so much confidence, that when the dressing was over Nigel looked up with a smile, and said cheerily:

"That's better—I shall do now."

"I hope so," said the doctor. "Be good enough not to talk for the present, however. Are you disposed to obey orders or not?"

"To obey," said Nigel, smiling.

"Then don't open your lips again to-night without absolute necessity. I will look at you again in an hour or two. Captain Vanborough, may I speak to you?"

Vanborough quitted the tent with him, leaving Darenth in charge. And then the doctor gave him orders as to his management of the patient, and put matters in such fair train, and spoke so hopefully about his recovery, that

Vanborough's mind was more lightened and cheered than he could have expected it to be.

He invited his guest to stay the night, an invitation which was at once frankly accepted. The camp had by this time become a scene of drunken revelry, and Vanborough was glad to have a companion at his own evening meal, which otherwise he would have felt very solitary.

He was soon led into giving an account of Nigel's encounter with Vallor, but he happened not to mention the Spaniard's name until the very close of his narrative. And then the doctor, who had been smoking, put down his long cigarette with a rather curious expression of countenance.

"What name did you say?"

"Vallor. Do you know it?"

"I have heard it before," said the doctor, coolly beginning to smoke again. "Do you know his Christian name?"

"Sebastian."

"Ah! What is he doing here?"

"Gambling chiefly, I believe."

"Has he a wife?"

"I fancy not. He brought some news of his sister-in-law to a man in the camp—that was perhaps his first motive in coming here."

"I knew something once of a man of that name," said the doctor, slowly, as if weighing his words, "but he was married."

"This man may have been married, too, for aught I know," said Vanborough, lightly. "He only spoke to Darenth about his brother and his brother's wife."

The doctor repeated the word "Darenth" with an abstracted air.

"It is curious," he said presently, "to find that you mention the name 'Darenth' in connection with that of Vallor. I know them in connection, too."

"Have you been to England?"

"Ten years ago."

"Perhaps you visited a little place called Charnwood? You might have heard both those names there."

"Do you know Charnwood?" asked the doctor.

"Intimately. I was born there."

A sudden light flashed into the man's dark eyes. But he spoke quietly, almost carelessly.

"Excuse my asking you another question. Can you tell me whether a relation of the Darenth family has returned to them yet from America? Her name was Vallor; she had married a man called Constantine Vallor."

"I should have heard of such a person had she arrived at the Darenths' farm," said Geoffrey. "I can safely assure you that no one of that name has been seen there. Besides, I suppose, from the man Vallor's account, that it was she who was drowned in the wreck of some ship, seven or eight years ago, with her husband."

The doctor paled a little and frowned. "Neither she nor her husband was drowned," he said. "I was there."

"During the wreck?"

"Yes; and afterwards. I had the privilege of knowing Madame Vallor well."

There was a silence. Vanborough felt the presence of some unusual emotion in his visitor's mind, and did not wish to intrude observation upon it. But before long the doctor spoke again.

"I believe," he said, "that Madame Vallor and her husband are both alive. I have not seen either of them for many years. But if either of them had died, I fancy I should have heard." Then he paused. "I have not yet introduced myself by name, Captain Vanborough. I am sufficiently civilised, even in South America, to carry my card about with me sometimes. Allow me to offer it to you."

Vanborough's eyes fell with some curiosity upon the card thus presented to him. But the name upon it was utterly unknown to him. It ran thus:

"Oliver Burnett Lynn."

CHAPTER X

GEOFFREY'S COIN

SIR WILFRED VANBOROUGH and his daughter were riding together through the Charnwood lanes. Here, coming from the village, they saw a young woman, whose face lighted up with a flash of recognition as she met them. Clarice looked at her with interest. This was Joan Darenth, whose brother had gone to Buenos Ayres with Nigel and Geoffrey. Nigel had spoken to her of Luke, and Gilbert had commended the beauty of Luke's sister; Geoffrey had not mentioned her, and Clarice had no suspicion of any special friendship existing between the two. So when she saw her in the road she called her father's attention to the passer-by with a low-toned remark:

"That is the girl whose face Gilbert put into his last picture."

Sir Wilfred shot a hasty glance at the dark beauty of the face beneath its white sun-bonnet, and started visibly.

"Oh, yes, a Darenth, I see," he said, and would have passed on with a slight nod had not Clarice reined in her horse.

"She wants to speak to us, papa."

For Joan had stopped and curtsied, with an unmistakable desire for speech in her face and eyes.

"Well, my good girl," said Sir Wilfred, rather impatiently, "what do you want? Had you not better come to the house if you wish for anything?"

"I have only something to give you, sir; something that belongs to you rather than to me."

Meanwhile Joan was bringing out a little parcel from her pocket. Her face was flushed, but her eyes were as clear as day when she offered it to Clarice.

"I've been carrying it about with me all day," she said, "and I called at the house with it this afternoon; but you were out, miss, and I wanted to put it into your own hands, or the master's. I found it on the ground three weeks ago or more, but I couldn't return it earlier, because I had been nursing the sick at Spences' cottage, and Doctor Ambrose wouldn't allow me to go anywhere."

"What is it?" said Sir Wilfred, as Clarice undid the wrappings, and Joan, with another curtsy, prepared to go upon her way. "Wait a moment, my girl."

"Thank you, sir; I'm bound to be home by nightfall, and must make haste," said Joan, resolutely avoiding the appearance of waiting for a reward. "Good afternoon, sir."

"But Joan, Joan," said Clarice, holding up the coin, "this is not mine. Why do you give it to me? Is it yours, papa?"

"No," said Sir Wilfred, "it is not mine. You must be mistaken, my good girl."

Joan turned round and came back to the side of his horse, where she looked steadily up into his face as she answered, "I thought you would know it, sir, as I did. It's the little gold coin that Mr. Geoffrey brought from Norway, and used to wear on his watch-chain. He must have dropped it somewhere, and I picked it up."

A wave of crimson suffused Sir Wilfred's pale high features. His brow contracted; for a moment he did not speak. Then he stretched out his hand to Clarice for the coin.

"If that be the case," he said coldly, "you had better keep it until you have an opportunity of transmitting it to him. I have nothing to do with his property."

And he placed the coin in her hand. Joan glanced at Clarice, but she was mute and white as a snow wreath.

"I thought, sir," said Joan quietly, "that you might like to keep it as a remembrance of your son."

"I have a very sufficient remembrance of him," said Sir Wilfred, with a haughtiness of tone which he did not think it worth while to suppress in Joan Darenth's presence, and which, indeed, he never imagined that she

would comprehend. "Keep it yourself—as a reward for your honesty."

He passed on, and for a moment Clarice was left face to face with Joan.

"I will keep it," said Joan, with sudden hardihood and a flash of resentment in her beautiful eyes, as she looked into Clarice Vanborough's face. "I will keep it—not as a reward, but in remembrance of him—until he comes back to claim it for himself."

And without a word of farewell, without the customary curtsy, which she was generally so careful never to omit, she walked rapidly away, with a glance of scorn worthy of Sir Wilfred Vanborough himself.

When she reached her home, she sought out a little piece of black ribbon, which she put through the hole in the coin and then tied round her neck. She meant to wear it until she saw Geoffrey Vanborough once more.

Sir Wilfred shut himself up more and more in his study. Clarice gave a few orders to the housekeeper in the morning, wrote her letters, read a great deal in the library, dispensed alms in a distant, mechanical way to the poor, took solitary walks beneath the melancholy elm-trees in the park, went to church on Sundays, and came home chilled to the bone, lay awake at nights, and grew more like a white snow-maiden day by day.

Clarice and her father—when he went, which was seldom—sat in the square pew in the centre of the church. Sitting thus in her seat one Sunday morning, during the sermon, she lifted up her eyes and let them fall upon the face of Joan Darenth, in the singing-pew. The colouring of her face was so rich and beautiful, without any want of refinement or sensibility, the pose of her figure expressed so much quiet strength and composure, as well as stately grace, that Clarice felt a sensation of rest in looking at her. As she came out of church she said to her father :

"May I ask Joan Darenth to come and see me?"

Sir Wilfred stared a little, then concluded that she wanted the girl on some matter of household work or millinery, and answered impatiently :

"Of course. Give your own orders."

But Clarice did not want to give orders. She left his side,

and went back to the side door, where she saw Joan's tall figure and sedate face behind the pushing, giggling singing-boys and girls. The group fell back as Miss Vanborough approached, and the way was clear between her and Joan Darenth. She held out her slim hand in its dainty glove, and laid it between Joan's unaccustomed fingers.

"Will you come and see me to-morrow at Charnwood?" she said, looking up in Joan's face. "I seldom walk so far as your home or I would go there myself. But if you do not mind the trouble——"

"It will be no trouble," said Joan, flushing crimson through the clear brown of her skin, as Geoffrey's sister invited her to the home of his boyhood. "I shall be glad to come. At what time, miss, please?"

"At eleven o'clock in the morning," said Clarice, quite unconscious that she named a peculiarly inconvenient hour for the farmer's daughter. But Joan would have borne a great deal of inconvenience before declining an invitation from a Vanborough, to whose family she considered that she was bound by all the ties of fealty and feudal reverence.

The visit paid next morning was a highly successful one. Clarice had received letters from Nigel and from Geoffrey during the previous week, and Joan had not received any from Luke. It was natural that the sister should long for news about her brother, and that details of South American life should interest Joan so deeply. Clarice was almost surprised to find her so well versed in the history and geography of the *Bandes Orientales*. "I wanted to read about the places where Luke was going," said Joan, with a guilty blush. And then Clarice promised, as Luke did not write regularly, to keep her informed of his movements, as well as she could gather them from the letters of her brother Geoffrey and Mr. Tremaine.

After this first visit Joan came to Charnwood very often. Clarice talked to her of Mr. Tremaine sometimes, and even more frequently of Geoffrey; it was such an unexpected well of pleasure, springing up in the desert of her life, to speak of the two dear ones whose names she dared hardly utter in her father's hearing.

And what was it to Joan?

Time after time she told herself that she must go to Charnwood no more; that she might as well drink poison as listen to those bitter-sweet details of Geoffrey's daily life; that she was a fool ever to have set foot over the threshold of his home. She would go out from Clarice's presence with throat swelling and eyes smarting from unshed tears; her hands would clench themselves with pain amongst the folds of her dress when Clarice read sentences from those loving, brotherly, half-wistful letters which Geoffrey now and then sent her. It was so hard that she could do nothing to lighten his burden of toil and pain; so hard that she could not send him even a little message to show that she remembered him! At times the weight of having to manifest merely discreet commonplace interest in Captain Vanborough's affairs was almost more than she could bear.

But for Clarice's sake she did bear it. As summer deepened into autumn, and autumn into winter, and Sir Wilfred grew more and more unsociable and morose, and Clarice's life more and more lonely in consequence, Joan saw that she could do this girl of nineteen years some service. The time came when the news of Nigel's wound was received, when his return to England was long delayed, when he himself was unable to write, and, in the press of business and sick-nursing, Geoffrey's own letters became few and far between. Then Clarice grew whiter and slenderer day by day; she did not complain, but she looked listless, weary, miserable, did not sleep, did not eat, did not take exercise, until Joan forced her into something like activity. Joan came and talked cheerfully, read aloud to her, persuaded her to visit the poor and sick, even coaxed her into calling upon some of her old acquaintances in the neighbourhood. In time her presence became so necessary to Clarice that Joan was invited to spend the winter months with her, and Sir Wilfred was very anxious to give her wages and call her a "companion" to his daughter. But although Joan had no foolish objections to the earning of money, "it went against her," she said, "to take gold from Sir Wilfred," and not a penny from his hand would she touch. "I take enough from you," she said to him one day with a touch of pride, "when

I eat your bread and sleep in your house, and I am free to go at any moment I choose. I cannot take money from you for doing my own pleasure." And Sir Wilfred yielded outwardly to this reasoning, though, being in his way nearly as proud as Joan herself, he cast about in his own mind for ways in which to do her family service in return for the service she did his daughter.

It was a damp afternoon in November when Clarice sallied forth into the garden with rather a brighter look than usual. Here she walked up and down for some little time, until she saw Joan hastening from the house to meet her.

"Well," she said, "have you found your novel cure for low spirits, Joan?"

"It is here," said Joan, her eyes brimful of laughter as she showed a saw which she carried in one hand.

Clarice lifted her delicate eyebrows.

"What are you going to do with it?"

Joan looked round. There was a half-dead, lifeless-looking laurel branch thrusting itself across the path. She attacked it boldly with her weapon, sawing it steadily, vigorously across, until, at the end of a few minutes, she had severed it from the trunk. Then she set to work upon another.

"I told you I had the gardener's permission," she said. "These branches can be used for firewood, and the laurels want thinning. It is the best work in the world for a cold day. There!" she said at last, "now I feel better. My life here seems too quiet for me sometimes, Miss Clarice. I need to use my arms and hands, and put out all my strength now and then if I am to be well and happy."

She drew herself up to her full height, and threw out her arms in a grand wide sweep. With nostrils dilated, flashing eyes, lips parted with a proud, frank smile, she might have stood for a statue of some goddess of liberty, some queen of a savage race "whom bonds could never hold, nor harshness tame."

But Clarice, who was generally so quick to seize upon new points for admiration in Joan's beauty, now looked at her with strange discomfiture and dismay; for in this full

exertion of her strength Joan had paid little attention to the details of her dress, and a black ribbon that she wore round her neck had become untied. It fluttered loose now, and from it hung the coin which she had vowed to herself to wear until Geoffrey's return.

Becoming conscious of Clarice's astonished gaze, she suddenly looked down, blushed like a red rose, seized her token and thrust it out of sight, but not before Clarice, pointing to it, had said, in a low tone of distinct offence and astonishment :

"Why do you wear that coin ? What does it mean ?"

CHAPTER XI

DARENTH OR VANBOROUGH ?

JOAN'S sudden movement, her quick look at Clarice, followed by a shame-faced dropping of her eyelids, proved to that keen observer's mind that further inquiry was needed. It was with a certain edge in her voice, therefore, that Clarice asked :

"Why should you wear that coin there—in that way ?"

Seeing that Joan did not know how to answer, she continued :

"Surely it is the one you picked up?—the one you offered to us when we met you in the road last August ? Why should you hide it ?"

"To keep it—safe," said Joan, faltering.

"Safe ? Till his return—as you said ? Quite right ; but surely it need not be hidden in that manner, as if it were a—remembrance—a token of—something," said Clarice, growing rosy-red, and looking at Joan with offended, unfriendly eyes. "It is not—not quite good taste in you, Joan, if you will allow me to tell you so," she proceeded, with a slightly dictatorial, though still courteous, air, as if she were desirous of lifting her companion to her own level. "If you wear Captain Vanborough's coin at all, wear it openly ; not as if you were ashamed of it."

"Ashamed of it !" said Joan, recovering her self-

possession at the words. "I am not ashamed of it, nor of what it signifies."

"What does it signify?"

"Oh, Miss Clarice," said Joan, turning to her with a pathetic look and a slight outward movement of her hands, as if she longed to take the girl in her arms and hold her fast while she made her confession, "does not your heart tell you why?"

Clarice answered coldly, "No."

"Then," said Joan, letting her hands drop to her sides, "I should be a fool to say."

This answer roused Clarice's ire. "But you must say—you must tell me why, at once. I have a right to know. I am Geoffrey's sister."

Joan shook her head, and looked at the ground. "If you will not tell me," said Clarice, her clear high tones vibrating with haughty anger, "I must demand my brother's property. I will take care of Geoffrey's coin."

Again Joan astonished her. She said, "Certainly," with mournful readiness, took the ribbon from her neck and laid it in Clarice's hand. Then, while Clarice still stood hesitating, she turned towards the house.

"May I go now, if you please, miss?"

"Go? Where?"

"To pack up my clothes," said Joan, meekly. "The carrier will call for them, or our yard-boy. I can send him, if I reach home before five o'clock."

"Very well," said Clarice, coldly. Joan's rapid decision and action seemed to have turned her to stone. She hardly looked up when Joan curtseyed and moved away with a hasty dash of her hand over her eyes.

"Good-bye, Miss Clarice." Joan almost sobbed as she spoke. "I am going."

Clarice let her go. She felt as if she could not utter another word.

But before Joan had taken three steps in the direction of the house the girl's heart smote her. How could she let her friend leave her in that cold way? She called her by name, sprang after her, put her arms about Joan's stately shoulders, and melted into rare tears.

"Dear Joan," she said, "sweet Joan, forgive me. I am

an unkind, cruel girl; what would Nigel say if he saw me now? Take the coin; papa gave it you to keep; and wear it as you like, without telling me anything about it, only—only——”

“*Nay, miss,*” said Joan, gently disengaging herself, “I could not keep Captain Vanborough’s property, as you call it, with a clear conscience. I thought it was mine before, to do what I liked with. But I’ll give it you back now. It’s none the worse for my wearing it.”

“*The worse?*” said Clarice, vehemently. “It ought to be the better for touching a noble-hearted, generous woman like you. But it is only metal, and cannot be harmed or mended; and I, who might be mended by you a little, am driving you away by behaving like a wretch to you! Take the coin, Joan dear, and let us say no more about it, but come back and be my friend again.”

“*No,*” said Joan, who had listened to this outburst with down-dropped eyes and a sorrowful face, “if I come back I must tell you why I kept the coin hung round my neck and hidden. And tell you I will, before I touch your hand again, or the coin either,” she added, raising her eyes with a flash of light in them which made Clarice involuntarily shrink back. “I owe you that much truth-speaking. I wore it because he had worn it once before; because I knew it had been his. And because I loved him—and love him still.”

She turned pale as she said these words, but, as Clarice did not answer, and words that would not be restrained came thronging to her lips, a fine red flame crept up into her cheeks, and her dark eyes glowed like fire.

“*What harm did I do him by loving him?* No more harm than I did to his senseless bit of gold by wearing it next my heart. Love is free; love degrades nobody. He may be above me in station, as the world accounts station. God made us equal. He did not forbid me to love Geoffrey Vanborough because I was poor and ignorant and obscure. Only men’s foolish customs and foolish pride would do that. And I—I have not tried to step out of my place. When—if he asked me to marry him, I would refuse. I might harm him; and I would not harm him for the world, because—I love him.”

She would not even do what might lower him in his sister's estimation. She would not say that Geoffrey had loved her long even before she thought of loving him.

"And now," she said, dropping her voice, "now I have told you all I can go home in peace. You shall not feel that I am deceiving you. I have done your brother no injury, and I had my right to love, like any other woman. Perhaps you will not forgive me for what you may call my presumption; I cannot help that. I will go to my own people, and you can forget me—save as a poor, foolish girl, who was not wise enough to care only for men in her own class."

There was an unusual touch of bitterness in her speech and tone.

"It is high time for me to go," she said, as Clarice did not answer. And suddenly she started forward.

"Joan," said Clarice, softly. "Joan."

And when Joan turned, she saw that Clarice's dusky eyes were full of tears, and her slender hands were reaching out for hers. She surrendered one of her hands to Clarice's nervously eager clasp, and waited with studious stillness for her judgment.

"You told me to ask my own heart, Joan," said the girl. "I have asked it, and it tells me what to say. Did you think I was so worldly and conventional as to despise you for loving? Do you think I am not glad that you—that anyone—— Why didn't you go out with him, Joan, to South America?"

There was both subtlety and simplicity in the question. Joan's arm was round her now, and Joan looked down at her with grave, sad tenderness.

"Do you think I should have gone if he had asked me?"

"Yes," said Clarice, with craftiness. "You would have gone if you thought you could have helped him, and made his life less miserable than it is now."

"Miserable?" said Joan, with dilating eyes.

And then Clarice told her, as far as she knew it, the story of Geoffrey's banishment from home. She had various reasons for doing so. Clarice's nature was a

complex one—she seldom knew how to act or feel with entire singleness of motive, and not unfrequently her actions were prompted by a combination of apparently quite opposing forces. Thus, in this case, she at once honoured Joan for her unselfish love, and was shocked by it; again her generosity triumphed over her feeling of its unfitness. Then it occurred to her that Joan was the very woman who could be happy with Geoffrey in his settler's life; and yet she wanted to try her faith by an account of the suspicion attaching to him; and if Joan's trust in him had wavered, she would not have been without a certain joy in the fact that only herself and Nigel knew how to do Geoffrey justice. Alas! Joan must not suppose that Geoffrey's life was a pleasant, easy one. If she loved him she must be prepared to hear of his troubles as well as of his prosperity.

But Clarice repented of the inclination to malice which had prompted her last words when she saw Joan's cheek turn pale, and her lips take the straight line of pain. And if she had hoped that Joan would be a little scared by the thought of disgrace and the hint of dishonour she was mistaken—for what she said was this:

"Is it possible that anyone who knows him should not take his word against all the world? Oh, what he must have suffered—and I, not knowing all the while, not able to do anything."

"You would have trusted him, then; you would have gone to South America?"

"He never asked me," Joan answered gravely; and Clarice felt herself rebuked, although she hardly knew why.

"And now," said Joan, "Miss Clarice, you must let me say good-bye. I think I had better go home. We cannot be to each other exactly as we have been before."

"We can be more," said Clarice, eagerly. "We shall be like sisters. Don't leave me, Joan, just when I am so lonely."

"I will come back, perhaps," said Joan, after a little pause. "I must go and see my father now, and walk about the old house and do the old work. It will do me good. And then, Miss Clarice, I will come and see you, if

you will still let me be your friend. But just now I cannot stay."

Joan went home, therefore, where her father and elder brother were glad, in a sedate, restrained way, to have her, and skilfully enough she gathered up the reins of government which had for the time fallen from her hands. The presence of Madame Vallor was scarcely a relief to her.

True, she was a cultivated woman, who seemed to have seen a good deal of the worst side of the world, and her revelations might have possessed startling interest for Joan; but she was curiously reticent and unexpansive.

From the day when she first set foot upon the threshold of her English relations to the present time she had said nothing of her past life. She had insisted upon paying a sufficient sum for her maintenance, and, although she did not help in the household work, she was never in the way. She sat alone in her own room sometimes, sometimes she was seen embroidering wonderful designs on silk and satin, which Joan took to the nearest town and sold for her at the shops. She was so skilful a workwoman that she soon received more orders for her embroidery than she cared to execute. But in her quietness, her industry, her exceedingly great reserve, she was not a very enlivening companion for Joan, although the affection that existed between the two never for an instant wavered.

Meanwhile, Clarice Vanborough's life became more and more lonely and self-absorbed. Quietly and uneventfully winter glided into spring. The mails came irregularly, and she sometimes questioned herself as to whether Nigel were a little less fond, a little less constant, than he used to be.

It was in this state of mind that she went out with her father for one of the rare walks in which he sometimes accompanied her.

It was a bright day in March, a cheerful day, but not one that would, perhaps, delight the heart of a Southerner. "Sol at last," Sir Wilfred remarked to his daughter, as they passed upon the road a man with a swarthy, pinched face and a look of shrinking cold.

"That man looks like an Italian," said Clarice.

"He must suffer in this climate," said Sir Wilfred,

with an involuntary shrug of the shoulders, as he met the cutting wind full in his face and pulled up his collar. Sir Wilfred did not love an English winter any more than did the Spanish stranger, Sebastian Vallor.

"Who is that?" asked the dark-faced foreigner of a man in the copse, as he pointed to the tall, thin, white-haired gentleman who had passed.

"That? Why, that be Sir Wilfred Vanborough and Miss Vanborough. Where have you lived that you don't know that?" said the man, with a fine contempt for any person who came from "furren parts."

"That is Sir Wilfred Vanborough, is it?" said Sebastian Vallor; and a cruel smile played about the corners of his thin lips as he looked after the retreating figure. "Well," he added to himself in Spanish, "I could tell you something about your two sons, señor, which you are not likely to hear from either of them. What can I make of my secret, I wonder?"

He meditated a little, then muttered to himself as he walked on:

"The other brother ought to pay high if I keep his secret. Well, with my claims on the Darenths, and my knowledge of the Vanborough family affairs, I did well to beg my way to Charnwood. Should I give my name or not? I suppose not, for I believe the girl writes to her lover and brother. Jacobi would do; nobody but Maddalena knew me by that name, and she, the Fates be praised, is dead. Shall I try it?"

He heard the sound of footsteps and looked up. The white-haired gentleman and his daughter were returning from their walk. They were close upon him now.

With a strange, evil look upon his face, Sebastian Vallor advanced towards Sir Wilfred, lifted his hat and made two elaborate bows, one to him and one to the beautiful young lady.

"May I venture," he said, "to address a few words to Sir Wilfred Vanborough?"

CHAPTER XII

VALLOR'S STORY

"If you wish to speak to me on business," said Sir Wilfred, eyeing the stranger with some suspicion, "I should prefer seeing you at the house. It is close by; you see the chimneys above the trees."

Sebastian Vallor cast a sharp glance towards the house, then bowed more deferentially than before. "I am obliged to you, sir," he said. "Perhaps my business might be more easily transacted with you alone."

And then he glanced at Clarice, sighed, and dropped his eyes.

"I am going to the house," said Sir Wilfred, coldly. "You have only to follow. Come, Clarice."

They walked on in silence. Clarice entered by the library window, which opened down to the ground. Sir Wilfred conducted his visitor to the front door, and led him into the hall.

"Now," he said, "what is your business?"

"My business," said Vallor, with affected hesitation, "has to do with your eldest son, the one at present in South America."

Sir Wilfred started, his face turned pale, his brow contracted.

"If you come as that young man's friend," he said severely, "I can only inform you that he cannot expect any further assistance from me. I have done all for him that I intend to do."

"But if I do not come as a friend?" said Vallor, his voice sinking to a whisper that sounded like a hiss. "If I come to you with the story of my wrongs—of ruin worked by him—of destitution caused by him—then, will you listen to me?"

A convulsive thrill passed over Sir Wilfred's face. In

a moment he was calm again; but Vallor noticed that his white hand was grasping the back of a chair as if to steady himself, and that his breath for that one moment came short and fast. Then he spoke in icy, measured tones.

"Do you mean," he said, "that you have come to me for pecuniary assistance?"

Vallor turned deadly white. He performed the best bit of acting that had as yet fallen to his lot in this interview. He simply bowed and put his hand on the door as if to let himself out. The expression of wounded feeling upon his face was perfect.

"I beg your pardon," said Sir Wilfred, instantly but haughtily. "I had no desire to be discourteous. If you have anything to say to me about Captain Vanborough I will hear it in private. May I trouble you to come this way?"

Vallor followed him up the narrow stairs to his study. Here Sir Wilfred took his usual seat at his desk, where he looked severely magisterial, and motioned Vallor to a chair before him.

"Now," said the baronet, slightly bending his stately head, "I am ready to hear any story you may have to tell me; but I must premise that a claim upon Captain Vanborough constitutes no claim upon me."

"Do I not know that?" said Vallor, throwing a pathetic mournfulness into his voice, and narrow, but beautiful, dark eyes. "I told myself so. I did not come to England to find you out; but when I was starving, destitute, almost desperate, in London, I said to myself, 'I will look for Geoffrey Vanborough's father or brother; I will tell them my story; I hear they are just men; I will lay my case before them, and see whether they justify him—or me.'"

"Go on," said Sir Wilfred. As he listened he placed his elbow on the desk and his hand over his lips as if to conceal any trace of emotion. "Where did you meet my—Captain Vanborough?"

"I met him in South America," said Vallor. "My name is Constantine Jacobi. I was a settler, with a grant of land from Government; but, as you probably know, the

settlers in that part of the country are very much dependent one on the other, as they have to guard themselves against attacks of Indians and other enemies. Europeans, therefore, as a rule, feel bound to assist each other in every possible way. My first acquaintance with your son began at midnight in a forest, where he sought refuge in my little hut from the pursuit of an armed band of Gauchos and Indians, who were trying to rob him. I let him in; I defended him to the best of my power. Finally his assailants rode off. He professed himself grateful for my help—I did not escape without a wound from a charge of shot—and we swore friendship upon the spot."

Vallor waited a little. Sir Wilfred's eyes were fixed upon his face with gloomy attention, which he found somewhat disconcerting. Presently, however, he continued :

"I did my best for your son, Sir Wilfred. I told my friends that he was also a friend of mine; and they did their best for him too. A great deal of comfort in those wild parts of the world depends upon your popularity with your comrades. Your son had the gift of making himself popular; but he owed me a little for some of the introductions I gave him. I may mention General Rosas, also the Bishop resident at Monte Video, and Doctor Diego, the celebrated naturalist of Buenos Ayres, all good friends of mine, who received Geoffrey Vanborough into their houses at my solicitation."

"You were too confiding, Mr. Jacobi," said Sir Wilfred, with an icy smile, and a slight hesitancy in pronouncing the unfamiliar name.

"I think so now," said Vallor, with a gleam in his dark eyes. "But matters went well for a time. At last I noticed a change in the manner of several of my friends. They had grown cold to me. By degrees I learnt that they believed that Captain Vanborough had asked a shelter in my house and been refused, that I had even fired at him from an open window, that I had been guilty of the grossest inhospitality in a place where inhospitality is counted a vice, Sir Wilfred—a greater vice than it would be in a less savage country."

"I can well imagine that."

"I appealed to your son; he laughed in my face. I appealed to a friend of his, some young man who had, I believe, accompanied him from England; I think his name was Tremaine. He treated me as if I were a dog, whom, if he dared, he would kick out of his sight. At last I forced them to listen to me. I said that if I received no apology we must have recourse to pistol and sword. That is our sad custom in South America, Sir Wilfred, I regret to say. But what else could I do? No other course was open to me as a gentleman. Your son——"

"Excuse my interruption," said Sir Wilfred. "I should be gratified if you would no longer speak of Captain Vanborough as my son. I disowned him some time ago."

Vallor bowed with a look of sympathy.

"I earnestly entreat your pardon," he said, with a certain grace of manner which struck Sir Wilfred almost pleasantly. "I would not for the world say or do anything that would grate upon your feelings. I might have known," and there he halted, as if afraid of saying too much.

"Might I ask you to continue your story?" said Sir Wilfred courteously.

"I will do so. Captain Vanborough requested me to call upon him to see whether matters could not be peaceably arranged. I consented to do so with some hesitation, but, after all, I reflected, he was an Englishman, the son, as I had heard, of a gentleman, probably a man of honour. And his friend, Mr. Tremaine, was with him; the one I thought would restrain the other. But I was mistaken."

He paused, and then went on. Sir Wilfred's hand was now shading his eyes; his face was turned from the light; Vallor's voice took a lower tone.

"Captain Vanborough had taken too much to drink that night. I saw the spirit bottle on the table; I saw him half fill his glass with brandy more than once and drink it off during our conversation. We said little, but I soon saw that no negotiation was possible. As it was too late at night I was anxious to bring matters to a close, and rose to go, having fixed the meeting for next morning. I would not have it there and then, for Captain Vanborough's

hand was unsteady, and I did not wish to take an unfair advantage. In arranging the details of time and place, some difference of opinion arose between him and Tremaine. Neither of them was in a condition to take the matter coolly. Tremaine called his friend by some opprobrious epithets—"forger," I think, "liar," "coward," and so on—and Vanborough, exasperated, struck him on the face. In a second the two men were struggling together for life and death. I interposed—but I am, unfortunately, not a strong man; I was repulsed at first; finally I got possession of Vanborough's knife, which, after the wild South American fashion, he carried in his belt. But not before he had inflicted several wounds upon his friend Tremaine.²²

"Ah!"

Sir Wilfred uttered a sort of gasp. And yet he told himself that no account of Geoffrey's baseness could surprise him.

"By this time," Vallor continued, "the camp was roused. Men came rushing in with lights and weapons, for our solitary lamp had been extinguished in the scuffle. Tremaine was insensible, and I held the bloody knife in my hand. Now, mark what follows, Sir Wilfred. Geoffrey Vanborough turns to his comrades and accuses me—me—of this assault upon his friend, professed great anxiety upon Tremaine's account, and would have shot me through the head upon the spot if the other settlers had not intervened to lead me away from the tent—a prisoner."

"What happened?"

"I was kept in bonds all night. Next morning Vanborough came out of his tent and incited the men to attack me. I think they would have tortured me to death—you do not know the ferocity of these men's habits—but for the fact that Tremaine, on recovering from insensibility, had done me the justice to send word that I was not to blame, and to tell them to let me go. But Vanborough was too violent to allow Tremaine's word to be taken. I was not killed certainly—as you see—but I was forced out of the camp (although my means of living were all there), and brutally told that I should be shot or hanged if I returned to it. And yet, sir, I was an innocent, though deeply

injured, man. But Geoffrey Vanborough—once your son, though you rightly disown him now—was my ruin."

There was a long silence, and then Sir Wilfred said, faintly :

"Mr. Tremaine lives in this neighbourhood."

Vallor acted surprise. But he was immediately aware that Sir Wilfred was thinking of the possibility of proving his story by reference to Tremaine, and his active mind foresaw the difficulty.

"One thing, Sir Wilfred, I ought to mention," he said, casting down his eyes. "You must be aware that in such life as ours is likely to be out there, many men prefer not to be known by a name which was perhaps an honoured one in their own land. Not that I have dishonoured mine—Heaven forbid!—but I had reasons for wishing to adopt another name than that of my father. In South America I called myself Sebastian Vallor; but these were my second and third Christian names only. My true name is Constantine Sebastian Vallor Jacobi; and I have given you that true name from the beginning."

"May I ask why you came to England?" said Sir Wilfred.

"My mother was an Englishwoman," said the man with a sigh. My father a Spaniard. She had fallen into poverty and ill-health. She wrote to me to visit her on her death-bed. I found the letter waiting for me at Buenos Ayres, whither I made my way after my expulsion from the camp. My friend, the naturalist, Dr. Diego, supplied me with funds for the voyage. I spent my last coins in furnishing my mother with the necessaries of life. She died—a week ago." He paused, as if overcome with emotion, and swept his long slender fingers across his eyelashes. "I had scarcely a penny left. I had no friends. In my desperation I resolved to tell my story to Sir Wilfred Vanborough—and I am here."

Sir Wilfred was leaning forward on his desk with a pained, gloomy expression on his pale countenance. Vallor had the discretion to remain silent. His nerves were strung to the highest pitch of expectation and suspense. What was it that the old man would do next?

Sir Wilfred turned and pulled a bell-rope. A servant appeared and received this order :—

"Ask Miss Vanborough to come to me here—immediately."

In a few minutes Clarice arrived. Tranquil in appearance as a fair, frail, spring flower, with her dreamy eyes, her cloudy hair, her exquisitely clear white skin. The Spaniard rose from his chair and bowed, thinking to himself meanwhile that she was curiously unlike the Vanborough he had known. But she was like Sir Wilfred.

"Clarice," said her father, coldly, "you receive letters, I believe, from—Captain Vanborough?"

"From Geoffrey? Yes," said Clarice, with equal coldness.

"And from Mr. Tremaine?"

Clarice lifted her delicate eyebrows slightly, and by a very faint turn of the head indicated that she thought her father had forgotten the presence of a stranger in the room. But Sir Wilfred repeated the question.

"From Mr. Tremaine?"

"Yes."

"When did you hear last from Mr. Tremaine?"

"I have not heard from him for some time. He has been ill. I think, papa, I can give you details about my correspondence better at any other time than this."

Her father hesitated. He was not moved from his purpose, but he was considering how best to carry it out.

"I have reason for wishing to see Geoffrey's later letters," he said, slowly. "One moment, Clarice. Mr. Jacobi, you will excuse my anxiety on this point. I am wishful to see whether Captain Vanborough gives any information to his sister concerning the affairs of which we have spoken."

He spoke politely, but Vallor—or Jacobi as he now called himself—felt that Sir Wilfred was trying to bring his truthfulness to the test. He suddenly became conscious of the danger in which he stood. In five minutes his villainy might be discovered; he might not be able to explain away the accusations that Vanborough would be sure to bring against him. What would this stern old man do to him? Could he imprison him? Vallor was very

imperfectly acquainted with English law, and he heard that Sir Wilfred was a magistrate. The discovery of truths that he could not deny to the Vanboroughs' satisfaction might place him in a very awkward situation.

With this thought he turned so pale, and drops of perspiration started out and stood on his forehead so plainly that Clarice noticed it and wondered what was wrong. Sir Wilfred, however, was too much absorbed in unpleasant reflection to inspect his visitor's appearance very closely, especially when Vallor turned his back to the light so as to defy observation.

"Go and fetch the letters," said Sir Wilfred to his daughter. "If you show me Geoffrey's, I may dispense with Mr. Tremaine's, perhaps." And by the curl of his lip and the repressed anger on his brow Clarice knew that the matter would not admit of argument.

When she had gone to fetch the letters, Vallor recovered himself sufficiently to say :

"You will remember, of course, that Captain Vanborough's account is certain to differ essentially from mine."

"Of course," said Sir Wilfred, "I shall bear that fact in mind."

There was a lurking sarcasm in the baronet's tone which Vallor did not like. He was silent, therefore, until Clarice returned with a little packet of letters in her hand, which she placed upon her father's desk.

"They are all here?" he asked.

"All of them, papa."

He bowed his head slightly, then said: "That will do. I need not detain you."

"Papa," said Clarice, hesitating, "you—you—will remember that these letters were not meant for you to see."

"Certainly."

"There is nothing in them of which either he or I need be ashamed," said Clarice, with a slight blush, "but there are things which may not altogether please you."

He thought that she meant that Geoffrey had been complaining of his lot, or of his father's treatment of him; whereas, she simply meant that he had said a good deal about Nigel Tremaine.

She left the letters to their fate, and when the door

had closed upon her Sir Wilfred turned to Vallor with a question.

"On what date," he said, "did the quarrel between Mr. Tremaine and Captain Vanborough take place?"

"On the twenty-second of October."

"Here is a letter," said Sir Wilfred, who had been examining the little pile, "dated October the twenty-seventh. Allow me. I hope you understand that I make this investigation simply in a friendly spirit."

It might be in a friendly spirit, Vallor reflected, and yet prove exceedingly inconvenient to the parties concerned. He waited anxiously, his hands clenched to stop their trembling.

Geoffrey was not a good letter-writer. His epistles were all short and concise, and in this case Nigel had been at his elbow to tell him not to alarm Clarice. So the account which Sir Wilfred read, first in silence, and then aloud, ran simply thus:

"You must not expect to see Nigel home quite as soon as he promised to come. He met with a little accident two or three days ago, and got his arm cut; the doctor says it is nothing serious, but he will have to stop in bed for a few days. You needn't alarm yourself about it, he says——"

And then Sir Wilfred stopped, for the sentence went on with the words, "and he sends you his love, and will write as soon as possible."

The next letters made a more or less careless reference to Nigel's "accident" and the fever that had supervened, but not until the very last letter was there any definite account of it, and that was evidently in answer to a pressing request from Clarice for news.

"Nigel will give you a history of his adventure when he comes home," wrote Geoffrey. "The fact is some man got into our tent, probably with thieving propensities, and there was a scuffle. Men use their weapons rather freely here, and Nigel was wounded with a knife. The fellow that did it was lucky enough to get off with his life, for the whole camp rose up against him, and I must confess that I was near inflicting condign punishment on him with my own hands. I was to blame in——"

"Why, good heavens!" said Sir Wilfred, suddenly, "the letter breaks off here with an apology for not writing more. 'He had only just time to close.' H'm!"

He seemed to reflect for a few minutes, then looked at Vallor, who was again breathing freely, and said in a grave tone:

"These accounts do not at any rate controvert your own, Mr. Jacobi. Not that I had any reason to suppose they would. Captain Vanborough's past life has not led me to expect anything from him but violence and deceit. Now be so good as to tell me how I can best assist you. The least I can do is to make some reparation for the losses which you seem to have suffered through my son's misconduct. Would a sum of money——"

"Sir," said Vallor, lifting himself suddenly from the chair in which he had been sitting, "I did not come to beg. Not a penny! Not a penny! Save what I earn by honest work."

"What, then, can I do for you?" said the baronet, rather coldly.

"If, sir, you could find me work to do," said the man, "honest work by which I could earn a living, I should be eternally grateful to you. Unfortunately I am not strong enough for much bodily exertion. If I could get writing, translation, or copying to do, I——"

"Excuse me. Do you write a good hand?"

"I shall be happy to show you a specimen of my handwriting."

And, furnished with ink and paper, Vallor sat down and wrote a few sentences, one in French, one in Italian, one in Spanish, and handed the paper to Sir Wilfred.

"You seem to be a good linguist," Sir Wilfred remarked. Then he added, rather slowly, "I have some copying and cataloguing to be done in which I want a helper. If you like to accept a loan from me for the present, and to take up your abode at the 'Vanborough Arms'—the village inn—I think I can give you work sufficient to occupy you for some time. You would come here at ten o'clock every morning, and work with me for a few hours, and I shall be glad to give you the remuneration that you may think the

work deserves. In the meantime, if you agree, here is an instalment."

And Sir Wilfred handed his guest a ten-pound note.

Vallor pocketed it with a smile, and felt himself master of the situation.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SECRETARY

ONE afternoon, about a week after the instalment of Jacobi as his secretary, Sir Wilfred entered Clarice's sitting-room with a gloomy and displeased air. She was at her desk writing a letter upon thin foreign paper.

"With whom are you corresponding?" he asked, dryly.

She looked up with a half-frightened air.

"With—Nigel," she said, in a low voice.

"May I ask why you write a letter to a man who has no claim of relationship upon you?"

"I have always written to Nigel," said Clarice, faltering a little.

"I am sorry for it. I must put a stop to this foolish correspondence. I forbid all intercourse with him or his family henceforward. Do you hear?"

"But why, papa? They have all been so kind to me," murmured poor Clarice, turning white, as the possibility of separation from Nigel rose up before her like a blank wall across her life.

"Why? Because I do not choose. Well, I will give you a reason, that you may not think me unjust. Nigel Tremaine is not a fit man for you to associate with. He is leading a wild, bad life in South America, and has some entanglement with a Spanish girl in Monte Video which is exceedingly discreditable to him. He is not a man whom I can any longer admit into my house."

He was not prepared to see Clarice rise from her chair and confront him with a dangerous look in her dark eyes, and bitter rebellion painted on her white face.

"You have tried to make me think evil of my brother," she said passionately, "and now you would do the same

about Nigel. You may tell me what you like. I will not believe one word against Geoffrey's honour or Nigel's truth. I trust them both—both—with all my heart and soul."

"Clarice," he said, throwing more sternness into his voice than he often showed to his daughter, "look at me." She looked and read an icy determination in his countenance before which her own resolve began to quail. "Before you leave this room I must have your solemn promise not to correspond with Nigel Tremaine."

"I cannot promise," she cried, her defiance merging into entreaty, and the tears starting into her eyes. "He is ill—he is expecting to hear from me; and he—he loves me."

"You are mistaken," said her father coldly.

Clarice burst into tears. It was easy then for him to draw her head down on his shoulder and to assure her that he was acting for the best, that he desired only her happiness, that it was his love for her that made him anxious, and so on. Before he left the room he had received the promise from her lips that she would no longer write to Nigel, although he could not convince her of Nigel's unfaithfulness.

Sir Wilfred's letter to Tremaine was exceedingly curt and cool. It requested him to return Miss Vanborough's letters, and to refrain from any further communication with her. Also Sir Wilfred intimated that any letter from Mr. Tremaine to himself, if opened in mistake, would be returned to the writer unread.

Clarice suffered in silence. It had never been her habit to complain.

Easter fell late that year, and it was not until after Easter that Gilbert and Merle came down to Charnwood for a few days.

By dint of great care and watchfulness, Gilbert seemed to have regained a fair proportion of health and vigour. He was liable to fits of great depression and remorse when the cause of his brother's absence was brought prominently before his mind; but the instinct of self-preservation generally kept accusing thought at bay.

He at once took a great dislike to Jacobi, but, on finding that Sir Wilfred was deaf to his remonstrances

concerning the position of responsibility and confidence that the secretary was gradually acquiring in the house, Gilbert shrugged his shoulders in a disgusted fashion, and did not trouble to disguise his ill-temper for the next few days.

His slighting manner was not lost upon Jacobi. But after dinner one evening, he sauntered leisurely into the library, and there, in the dim light, discerned the form of Mr. Constantine Jacobi snugly ensconced in the depths of a lounging-chair, evidently fast asleep.

Gilbert wheeled his own chair to the window in such a position as to turn his back to Jacobi. He heard the secretary rise from his seat, stretch himself, and walk up to one of the book-cases, from which he seemed to take a volume. It was in the curtly emphatic tone of hardly repressed disgust that he said :

"Ring the bell for lights, will you ? "

Jacobi either did not hear, or pretended not to hear. He went on reading.

Gilbert waited a moment, then said sharply, without turning his head :

"I told you to ring for lights."

Jacobi put down his book, paused, and came slowly to the window where Gilbert was sitting. His voice was very deferential as he remarked, in his subdued way :

"This twilight hour is a pleasant time for conversation, Mr. Vanborough."

"Possibly," said Gilbert, his temper rising. "I am not much inclined for conversation at present."

"You could spare me a few moments, perhaps, sir ? "

"Be so good as to ring for the lamp, if you please."

Gilbert had not raised his voice. Its clear low tones were pitilessly distinct, and cut through Jacobi's sentence like a knife. If he had looked round, he would have seen a glitter in Jacobi's eyes, a swelling of a vein upon his forehead, which might have warned him that he was exciting dangerous passions, but he did not look round. He was only angry to find Jacobi still at his elbow.

The next words fell from Jacobi's lips with a hissing sound scarcely above his breath.

"You take the wrong tone with me. *Diablos!* you

know not who I am or what I can do. Listen—I met your brother in South America——”

He paused, to let the words have full effect. Gilbert had sprung to his feet, startled and confounded.

“What—what do you mean?” he said, a wild fear creeping into his eyes, a sudden terror paling his face and making his breath come short and fast.

Jacobi enjoyed the situation, but did not wish to prolong the suspense too long. He had a wholesome dread of bringing on one of the attacks of illness of which he had heard from Sir Wilfred. But he could not resist the temptation to torture his victim before he let him go.

“What did I hear in South America? Did he tell me anything or did he not? We were good friends at one time, Geoffrey Vanborough and I; did you know that?”

His eyes gloated with savage joy over the sufferings of the man before him. Gilbert was crouching in his chair with his hand pressed to his heart. His breath came in gasps; he could hardly speak.

“What,”—he managed to stammer out, “what—did he—say?”

“Oh, don’t alarm yourself,” said Jacobi, coolly. “He did not say much.” Then, in a coarsely confidential way, he put his face close to Gilbert’s, and added the question which he deemed the finishing touch to his ingenuity. “He was too fond of you to let you bear the blame, I suppose?”

And as Gilbert could not answer, he supplemented the query with an exclamation, more to himself than to his interlocutor:

“What a fool he must have been!”

CHAPTER XIV

THE WIFE

“This won’t do,” said Jacobi to himself, as he regarded the physical distress of the man whom he had delighted in torturing. “He will slip out of my hands too soon if this goes on. Stay, I have a remedy.”

He placed his hand reassuringly on Gilbert's arm.

"You need not be alarmed, sir," he said, smoothly. "What I know I can keep to myself, if you will but be reasonable. You are ill; I think I can alleviate your suffering."

The wretched Gilbert felt the change of tone rather than understood the words; but the throbbing heart was not easily to be soothed into quietness. He sat crouched in a heap upon the high-backed chair, one hand clutching the arm of his seat, the other still pressed to his side.

Jacobi turned to a small cupboard let into the wall, whence he took a little glass and a water-bottle. He then lighted a wax candle on the writing-table, and produced from some part of his person a very tiny flask. Out of this flask he poured a few drops of translucent, yellow liquid into about a tablespoonful of water. This he proceeded to offer to Gilbert with scant ceremony.

The young man feebly tried to push the glass away. It was evident that he distrusted both medicine and physician. Jacobi laughed, a little sourly.

"*Dios!* I would not harm you," he said. "Drink; it will do you good. I shall not poison you."

Gilbert shuddered, but drank the potion thus offered him without further resistance. Jacobi replaced the flask in his pocket, put the water-bottle and glass back in their places, lighted a couple of tall candles that stood upon the mantelpiece, and blew out the wax-light on the table. Then he softly opened the doors leading into the drawing-room and billiard-room to make sure that nobody was listening, closed them again, and came back to Gilbert's side.

"Do you feel better now?"

The crouching attitude was changed. Gilbert was lying back, his face pale, but not contorted with pain; his breathing was freer, his hands relaxed.

"Yes," he said faintly, his eyes closed as if he wished to keep out the sight of his enemy.

"I got that medicine from an Indian woman," said Jacobi, keeping his gaze warily fixed upon Gilbert's face. "It cost me something to purchase her secret. She

taught me other things besides. But that is the most useful, perhaps. I sometimes think it would call a dying man back to life."

Gilbert sat up. The colour of his face was already natural, the fire was returning to his eye. But he did not speak; the power of utterance seemed for the time crushed out of him.

"And now," said Jacobi, suddenly dropping the artificial softness of voice which he had assumed during the last few minutes, "if you are well enough to talk business, we had better get it over before the ladies come."

Gilbert turned in his chair and covered his face with one helpless, shaking hand. The man's coolness utterly unnerved him.

"Haven't you anything to say?" Jacobi asked, with harsh emphasis. "Well, I don't know, after all, which is the greater fool, your brother or you. Don't you want to make your bargain while you can? Of course I shall not tell tales if you make it worth my while to hold my tongue. If you won't, I must go to those who will."

The man's insolence stung Gilbert into speech.

"To whom would you go?" he said, letting his hand drop.

"Oh, there are one or two persons who might be glad to buy my silence," said Jacobi, carelessly. "Your father now—or your wife—she has a nice fortune of her own, I understand——"

"Good God!" burst from Gilbert, with an agonised sob which he could not quite suppress. "It would kill me if Merle knew! And it would kill her too!"

Jacobi smiled. He felt now that the game was in his own hands. He saw that in time he should learn the whole story.

"She might think you justified," he said. "She would not wish to see her husband suffer. Sooner your brother than you, surely!"

"You do not understand," said Gilbert, with his head buried in his hands. "She would not suppress the truth—she would have Geoffrey back at all costs. I should be disgraced—dishonoured in her eyes for ever."

Jacobi shrugged his shoulders in contempt. "But

neither she nor Sir Wilfred would like the matter to be written about in your newspapers! You are a proud race, you English; you do not like to see bad stories about your noble families made public. And suppose I was to send a letter to the *Times* about it; would that do you any harm? A letter showing how the hospital—what was it?—for incurable people—had been defrauded! That would not please Sir Wilfred, nor Mrs. Gilbert Vanborough, nor Miss Clarice. I do not quite know how your brother Geoffrey would take it."

Gilbert uttered an inarticulate sound of pain. Jacobi went on reflectively:

"But what a howl there would be from the throats of your indignant truth-telling Englishmen! 'See,' they would say, 'here is a young, wealthy, high-born man who lives at home in ease and comfort with a beautiful wife and a great many admiring friends; while his elder brother works on an *estancia* in the La Plata, and herds mules and tames horses and skins sheep. Why is there all this difference?' And when they are told that it is because the younger brother has allowed the elder to be accused and banished and disgraced in his stead, and has not said a word to clear him, what will the honest, truth-loving Englishmen say then? This," he said, "would be hard for Gilbert Vanborough to endure."

Gilbert could not speak. The gasping sensation was returning.

"And what," said Jacobi, slowly, "what would you give me to save you from all that?"

"Anything—anything. Name your own terms—what will you take?" said Gilbert, looking up with hollow, pain-stricken eyes. "I can bear anything rather than exposure."

The very lavishness of this offer made Jacobi pause.

"I do not want much. You must let me live here unmolested, and not injure me with your father."

"That is easily promised."

"And you will not interfere with my actions—without informing me first?"

"How am I to know what you mean?" said Gilbert, recovering himself a little.

"You do not promise? Well, I can see what Mrs. Vanborough will say."

"Good heavens! No. I will promise what you like. I will not interfere with you in any way."

"Good. And you had better give a regular sum for current expenses," said Jacobi, waxing masterful in tone as he saw that Gilbert was entirely subjugated. "I am pinched for money. I want money now. I want a hundred pounds."

"I have not so much at hand. I am no richer than I used to be."

"You have married a rich wife. You are living on her money to some extent, I suppose. Get it from her."

"I think I can contrive to get it," said Gilbert, in a low voice.

The fact was that Merle had placed the management of her money entirely in his hands. She would accept unquestioningly any arrangement or explanation that he thought fit to give her.

"*Dios!* that is well," said Jacobi, almost in a good-natured tone. "You will give me the money to-morrow, then? I must have it quickly. And as long as it lasts and other things go well, we are good friends, and can afford to dispense with the fine *caballeros* in Buenos Ayres. I am not hard-hearted; I do not wish to distress the pretty little wife."

"You hound!" said Gilbert, between his teeth. "Leave her out of the question, will you?"

"What! proving rebellious already? Be careful, señor," said Jacobi, with a sudden change of tone. "I will not be insulted. Neither blood nor gold will erase the memory of an affront." Then dropping the magniloquent tone, and speaking almost in a whisper—"Are you so anxious to bring your brother home?"

But a glimpse of Gilbert's haggard, passionate face warned him not to go too far, even in dealing with this weak and pleasure-loving nature. He went on more quietly:

"I shall expect the hundred pounds to-morrow. And now I will leave you, Mr. Gilbert Vanborough. You

will be more civil to me perhaps than you have been before ! ”

And with these words he opened the door into the billiard-room, and so passed out into the corridor.

CHAPTER XV

THE COMPANION

SIR WILFRED was sitting as usual in his study, one morning about twelve o'clock, when his daughter entered. She so seldom repaired to this room that he was somewhat surprised to see her. He rose, however, on her entrance, and would have placed a chair for her, in his gravely courteous manner, had she not spoken with more haste and vehemence than she generally showed.

“ Please read this letter, papa. You will see there what Nigel says.”

“ Has he been insolent enough to write to you ? ”

“ He has not written ; I wish he had. He has sent me a message—through Geoffrey.”

Sir Wilfred looked steadily at his daughter.

“ Do you understand that your correspondence with Captain Vanborough must cease if it is made the vehicle of clandestine messages between you and Mr. Tremaine ? ”

“ The message is not a clandestine one ; he tells me to show it to you. But, oh, papa, you could never be so cruel as to prevent me from writing to Geoffrey ! ”

“ I trust I am never cruel,” said her father, coldly.

“ And, once for all, let me warn you, Clarice, that I will have no more messages sent between you and Tremaine. I shall soon cease to trust you if I hear of any more of them. Is this the letter ? Leave it and go.”

The fire died out of Clarice's cheeks and eyes.

“ Leave it ! ” she echoed, looking wistfully at the letter that she had placed in her father's hands.

“ Leave it and go,” he repeated. “ I will give it back to you if I see fit.”

His harsh manner always ended by frightening Clarice into passive obedience. She went away slowly with

downcast eyes and hanging head, and when she was fairly gone Sir Wilfred took up the letter.

He read it through from beginning to end. It was chiefly filled with ordinary news, and not until the close did Sir Wilfred come upon the following words :

“Keep up your heart, little girl. Things must come right to you in course of time. I have a message from Nigel which I shall give you word for word. He says, ‘Tell her to trust me. All will go well if she does that. She must not think that I could ever love anyone but her, that I could ever change. If she loves me and trusts me as I love and trust her, she will be my wife yet, though all the world were against us.’ He adds that you must show this letter to Sir Wilfred, as he will not do or say anything in an underhand manner. As to the letters, he says that he cannot see any necessity for returning them unless you wish him to do so. If you of your own free will write for them, he will send them. But, as you are to be his wife in the long run, he says he does not exactly see why he should give up the letters which he prizes next to yourself.”

Sir Wilfred dashed the letter down upon the table in a rage. He muttered angry words to himself, rose and walked to and fro in the room, wondering how best to silence this undaunted lover's lips, how best to bring Clarice “to reason.” He was then conscious that his anger and agitation had produced a curious physical effect upon him. A strange ringing in his ears, a cold numbness of sensation seemed to overpower him. And then he knew nothing more.

He was found by Jacobi later in the day in a state of insensibility. Doctor Ambrose was immediately summoned, and after some examination, pronounced it to be a paralytic stroke, chiefly affecting the right side and arm. He lay for some days in a dangerous state, and then began slowly to recover.

“He would never be the man that he was,” said the doctor ; but there was every possibility that he might still enjoy some years of comparative comfort and health.

His right hand would, however, be of little more use to him.

The person who nursed the sick man with the greatest care and skill was the secretary, Constantine Jacobi. He was never weary, never impatient; and he was clever in executing contrivances for the invalid's comfort as well as in—very cautiously—displaying an amount of medical knowledge which won for him Sir Wilfred's surprise and admiration, and Doctor Ambrose's profound dislike and distrust. He was invaluable also as an accountant, a writer of letters, and manager of Sir Wilfred's business affairs; and as his probity and conscientiousness seemed to equal his ability, Sir Wilfred grew to lean upon him and confide in him to an unexampled extent.

The Baronet was perhaps unconsciously influenced by the fact that Jacobi had one day announced to him in private that he was now a man of independent means, as a relation had recently died and bequeathed to him a legacy of four hundred pounds a year. "It is not a large sum in your eyes," said Jacobi, smiling delicately, "but it is a fortune to me. It enables me to work for my benefactor without the need of pecuniary recompense. Allow me, sir, to serve you without the question of money being raised between us. You were good to me in my distress; let me repay you by my devotion, now that I am free to pass my life as I will."

Sir Wilfred naturally refused to accept Jacobi's services without paying for them; but he was touched, as he said afterwards, by this proof of the man's gratitude and unselfishness. He even began to think how he could recognise the value of Jacobi's companionship and services in a codicil to the will which he had made since Geoffrey's departure for South America.

Doctor Ambrose suspected, though he did not breathe his suspicions to Clarice, some approaching softening of Sir Wilfred Vanborough's brain; and if he had known all that passed between Sir Wilfred and Jacobi when they were closeted for hours together, he would have been convinced that the softening process was already going on. Jacobi's next step was to prove—to Sir Wilfred's satisfaction at least—that he was the descendant of a

noble Spanish house, and that the pride of his ancestors matched Sir Wilfred's own. He produced letters, certificates, family relics, in abundance, and Sir Wilfred accepted them with the supine credulity of a weakened mind anxious to escape the trouble of examining for itself.

Two or three weeks passed quietly.

Clarice had formed the habit of breakfasting in her own sitting-room, so as to avoid any contact with Jacobi. It was with some surprise, therefore, that she received a summons to the study one morning about ten o'clock.

Sir Wilfred was seated in his armchair with a letter in his hand, and Jacobi was standing at his elbow.

Clarice kissed her father dutifully, bowed slightly to Jacobi, and took a seat opposite Sir Wilfred—not the seat that the secretary moved forward for her.

"You sent for me, papa?" she said.

"I did, Clarice. I wish to inform you of a change in the domestic arrangements of the house which your conduct has rendered necessary."

"My conduct?" said Clarice.

"You had better listen to me than speak yourself," said her father, in a cutting tone. Then he hesitated a little, as he often did now when anything disturbed him. "I—I feel that I am less able than—than I used to be to take care of you. You have no female relation of sufficient age and authority to be a useful companion to you. I think, therefore, of providing you with such a companion and friend."

"I want no companion," said Clarice. "I can have Joan Darenth to stay with me when I am lonely."

"Joan Darenth is not a proper friend for you," said Sir Wilfred, irritably. "No, you must have—a—lady of a certain age and position, who will look after household affairs—there is a great deal of waste going on, it appears to me—and walk with you, sit with you, and so on. In short, I think of engaging such a lady to be your companion, and I desire that when she comes you will treat her with—with—due respect and consideration."

"Engage a companion! Oh, papa! I never wanted a companion at all."

"Your wants have nothing to do with the matter. Mrs. Danvers is coming this evening, and I expect you to receive her suitably. And you will remember, Clarice, that she is invested with my authority, and that I expect you to submit to it."

"Authority—over me?" said the girl, slowly.

A strange light was stealing into her eyes; the colour was rising into her cheeks.

"Complete authority," said her father in a decisive tone. "It is time that authority was exercised over you by somebody."

Then Clarice's indignation broke out; not at all loudly or expansively, but in even a lower tone than usual, and with a flash of the eye that made Jacobi admire her more than he had ever done before. She rose to her feet as she spoke, and drew herself to her full height.

"I was not aware," she said, "that I required the exertion of any special authority over me. I obey you in everything, but I think I have a right to protest against the infliction of a companion who is to overlook my conduct. I do not think I have deserved this treatment from you, papa."

"Well, well, Clarice," said Sir Wilfred, rather helplessly, "you will get used to it in time. You will find Mrs. Danvers a very well-informed person, and—and—one——" he looked to Jacobi for assistance in the conclusion of his sentence.

"One," said Jacobi, softly, as he opened the door for Clarice, "who will henceforward relieve you of the necessity of taking lonely walks and drives, in which you might meet with undesirable acquaintances."

He bowed as she swept past without a glance at him, but he knew by the faint quiver of her mouth, the flicker of her eyelids, that his shaft had gone home, and he closed the door upon her with a smile.

The girl did not look nervous or ill at ease as she entered the drawing-room with slow, graceful movements and haughtily poised head; but in reality she was both. She was dressed in black with silver ornaments, and her pale face was singularly calm and impassive. The impression given to one or two beholders that evening was

that she was too frail and too passionless to give much trouble to the persons who sought to govern her.

Mrs. Danvers was a thin, tall woman, with one shoulder higher than the other, and a rather awkward gait. Her features were good, but spoiled by a bad complexion. Her eyes were dark and piercing and partially concealed by spectacles. She was handsomely dressed in a long trailing robe of soft texture and an indefinite bluish green colour, decidedly pleasant to the eye. Sir Wilfred looked at her with approval. She was exactly the sort of low-voiced, quiet-mannered, lady-like person whom he had required for Clarice; and he was grateful to Jacobi for finding and selecting her.

He gave her his arm when dinner was announced, and left Clarice to follow with Jacobi. It was with complete self-possession that Miss Vanborough feigned not to see his offered arm, and passed into the dining-room alone, leaving him to follow as he chose. But Jacobi only smiled with entire sweetness, slightly shrugged his shoulders, and entered the dining-room behind her.

The evening passed off quietly. Sir Wilfred was very courteous and more talkative than usual. Mrs. Danvers was rather silent, but her manner, if cold and a little formal, was unexceptional in its refinement. Her movements were not without dignity and grace, too, in spite of the malformation of shoulder and halting gait.

For Gilbert's sake Sir Wilfred was always tolerant of lameness.

Clarice went to bed early; too early for anyone else to think of retiring. Mrs. Danvers, Sir Wilfred, and Jacobi had another hour's conversation before separating for the night. Nothing was said concerning Mrs. Danvers' position; that was a subject which Sir Wilfred thought might well be left until the morrow.

For a few moments Sir Wilfred was summoned out of the room on business. Then Jacobi, who had been looking at an album on a table close to Mrs. Danvers, turned to her with a quick, stealthy movement.

"You see your work?" he said to her, below his breath.

"Yes," she answered, with a slight smile, "I do."

"The girl wants keeping down."

"I see she does."

There was a pause. Then she lifted her face a little and looked at him steadily.

"You did not tell me what you meant to do with her—ultimately?"

Jacobi looked round at door and window to see that everything was safe before he answered. Then he approached his mouth close to her ear, and whispered his reply:

"Marry her."

She was silent for a moment.

"Did you not expect that? What else should I do?" he said, rather nervously. "You promised—you are bound to help me."

"Oh, yes," she said, quietly; "I am ready to help you."

"You'll have your reward, you know."

"When?" she asked.

"When I succeed. On the day of my marriage."

"And my salary regularly before then?" she said, reflectively.

"Of course, of course. And a hundred down on my wedding day."

"Three hundred," she answered. "I could set the girl against you if I chose."

"You won't do that—you dare not."

"Three hundred," she repeated; "and more if I require it."

"Women are so grasping," he grumbled, as if to himself.

"Well, I shall be able to afford it then. But you will help me?"

"Am I not here to help you?"

And then Sir Wilfred re-entered the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XVI

"WHO IS MR. JACOBI?"

"MADAM," as the country folks had learnt to call her, was so silent and unobtrusive that her comings and goings excited little interest. Thus one fine evening she was passing softly through the great kitchen, where Seth and

his father and some of the farm men were supping together, when the utterance of a sentence or two by Farmer Darenth struck upon her ear and stayed her footsteps on the red-brick floor.

"Sir Wilfred says he'll send Mr. Jacobi to-morrow to see the colts. I'm sure I don't see what Mr. Jacobi has to do with horses; 'tain't very likely as he'll know much about 'em."

Madame Vallor made a step forward to the farmer's chair, without heeding Joan's words. She touched the old man's shoulder.

"Who is Mr. Jacobi?" she said.

"Mr. Jacobi?" said Darenth, rather at a loss for an answer. "Why, he's a foreigner, madam, that's what he is." He found it easier to say "Madam" than "Maddalena." "He's Sir Wilfred's seckitary, or man of business, whichever you like to call him. Now that the poor old gentleman's got a stroke he seems very dependent on other people."

"Where does he come from?"

"Well, I can't rightly say," Darenth answered, more and more at a loss to know what ailed his niece.

"Come away, dear," said Joan, soothingly. "Let father get his supper, and then he will talk to you as much as you like." She did not wish her cousin to attract further attention, for Seth and the half-dozen men were gazing open-mouthed, with evident distrust, at the white-faced woman who put incomprehensible questions at supper-time.

Madame Vallor yielded to Joan's kindly pressure, and withdrew. But when the servants had gone, and all traces of the meal were cleared away, when Reuben Darenth sat sucking his long clay pipe, and Seth had departed on his nightly visit to Patty, she came down again into the kitchen and took a chair beside her uncle.

"Well, my dear, and what can I do for you?" said the old man, forgetting to call her "madam" when he looked at her white, still face.

"I knew a Mr. Jacobi once," she said, deliberately. "A long while ago. I should like to know whether this is the same man."

"Was he a foreigner?" asked Reuben, with some interest.

"Yes," she said. "He was a Spaniard."

"I've heard that this Mr. Jacobi is a Spaniard, or else a Portuguese," said the farmer. "But some folks say he came from America."

"Ah!" A sudden gasp from Madame Vallor's lips caused Darenth to turn and look at her. But with an unusual effort over herself she smiled at him very sweetly. "It is nothing," she said. "Only a little pain—at my heart. Has Mr. Jacobi been here long?"

"Only since February. He's made the most of his time since then."

"Do you know his Christian name?"

Darenth shook his head doubtfully, but Joan interposed.

"Yes, father, don't you remember? He wrote a note to us once and signed his full name—'Constantine Jacobi.' I remember the name."

A sort of spasm crossed Madame Vallor's face. She stood up and spoke collectedly.

"Thank you. It cannot be the same man. I do not know any one of that name."

"All the better," said Darenth, heartily. "He's a slippery-looking customer, all smiles and foreign ways."

And then Madame Vallor bade him good-night, and went quietly to her room.

Next day she was decidedly restless. But after dinner she tried, rather fitfully, to engage Joan in conversation, and introduced the subject of Mr. Jacobi's visit. Would he come to the house, or would he merely enter the paddock and the stables?

"He will come to the house, I think," said Joan. "Mr. Sloman, the agent, always comes in and has a glass of beer with father. But of course I don't know yet what Mr. Jacobi will do."

She added, with some hesitation:

"Even if he only goes into the paddock, you can see him with father from your room window. Of course you wish to see whether he is your friend or not."

Joan was too clear-sighted. Madame Vallor seemed almost vexed by the suggestion.

"He was no friend of mine," she said, fiercely. "Why should I want to see him?"

And then she turned her back upon Joan and resumed her pacing of the room, which might have reminded a more sophisticated person than Joan of the movements of some wild animal in a cage.

Joan retired, not offended; only anxious and sorry that she had done or said anything amiss. But when she re-entered the room about four o'clock with a cup of tea, her cousin came up to her, kissed her on both cheeks, and apologised in her usual graceful, quiet way for her rudeness of speech.

But as Joan went down she heard the bolt of Madame Vallor's door suddenly and sharply drawn, and knew that her cousin was by no means so tranquil as she looked. And presently she saw Mr. Jacobi come with her father through the green orchard and the garden to the very door. Their voices were so distinct that she thought Madam Vallor might hear every word if her window were only open.

A few words on business passed between them, then Jacobi was asked to take beer, milk, or tea, but declined every offer. Then Reuben Darenth made him a rough compliment upon his knowledge of horses.

"I saw a good deal of horse-breaking in America," he answered.

"America? South America, may be?" said Darenth, with interest.

There was an almost imperceptible pause. "No, not South America," said Jacobi, coolly.

"I thought you might, perhaps, have come across my son Luke," said Darenth, who had only a vague sense of the extent of the American continent. "He writes to me from Buenos Ayres—if I call the name rightly."

Jacobi asked one or two indifferent questions respecting his whereabouts, and then took his leave, having transacted the business that Sir Wilfred had given him to do.

It was not until an hour had passed that Joan bethought herself of her cousin. She went upstairs to offer her some supper, and knocked at the door. There was no answer. She knocked again, but all was still as death. Then she called, and turned the handle of the door, expecting to

find it still bolted, but it yielded to her hand. Evidently Madame Vallor had withdrawn the bolt. Joan went in and closed the door behind her.

The woman whom she had left smiling, cheerful, busy with her coloured silks and gay embroideries at the broad bright window where the western sunshine was streaming in, lay upon her bed like an image of death, with rigid lips and blank, unseeing eyes, her hands clenched over the little rosary of black beads which Joan had seen her use only once or twice before.

"Maddalena!" Joan began, "what has happened? Are you ill?"

The blank eyes woke up into sudden, watchful life, but her lips uttered only the monosyllable:

"No."

Joan asked her a question or two, tried to warm her hands, which were cold as ice, laid a shawl over her, and got her some hot tea; but Madame Vallor only moved her head to one side, and whispered a request to be left alone. Seeing nothing else to be done, Joan finally obeyed. And then she relapsed into motionless passivity, broken only now and then by a long shivering sigh which was almost like a wail. But her hands had left the rosary and grasped at a little locket which she wore next her heart—a little trumpery thing of no value, just large enough to hold one curl of a baby's golden hair.

Next morning, however, she came downstairs and moved about as usual. A short time later she quietly announced to Joan that she thought that Charnwood did not suit her health, and that she had made up her mind to live in London. Remonstrances were of no avail. She went up to London to take lodgings and make arrangements, and in a short time quitted the farmhouse altogether. London, she said, suited her better than the country. She parted on good terms with her relations, and made a handsome wedding-present of her own beautiful work to Patty. Joan felt sure that one reason for her departure was the dislike that Patty had already manifested to "Madam." As to connecting it with Jacobi's proximity, the idea never once entered her head.

CHAPTER XVII

UNDER LOCK AND KEY

MEANWHILE Clarice was undergoing a succession of annoyances which, to her sensitive temperament, amounted to positive torture.

Her liberty of action was entirely taken away. Mrs. Danvers' watchful eyes were everywhere, and in everything she did she was supported by Mr. Jacobi's influence and Sir Wilfred's authority.

Gradually the toils of the plotters closed in upon her. Old servants were dismissed on the plea of economy, and their places either not filled or filled by persons whom Jacobi and Mrs. Danvers seemed to trust. Sir Wilfred, whose powers of mind declined rapidly from day to day, accepted in all good faith the statements made by Jacobi respecting the estate. He saw scarcely anybody who came to him on business; Jacobi saw everyone. The agent was discarded, and Jacobi filled his place, and talked of waste and possible ruin. The estate would have gone to wreck if he had not arrived in time to look after it, he averred. Then Gilbert came down, looking haggard and miserable, and had long interviews with the subtle secretary, and walked about the park with him, marking the trees that were to be felled, and said to his father that he had been very anxious about the estate, but that he had no doubt about its flourishing now that the management was in Mr. Jacobi's hands.

One evening Clarice quitted the drawing-room earlier than usual. Gilbert was still staying in the house, but had gone to dine and spend the night with a very old acquaintance of his father's. Sir Wilfred was annoyed by his absence, and was unusually touchy and punctilious.

She left the drawing-room after an hour of penance there, for Sir Wilfred insisted upon her taking a hand at

whist, a game which she detested, and Jacobi was her partner.

At last the weary game was ended, and she was free to depart. She touched Sir Wilfred's forehead with her lips, gave her hand to Mrs. Danvers and to Jacobi—a ceremony which she was never now allowed to omit—was bowed out of the room by the secretary, and went upstairs with a face as white as death from the strain of keeping back her tears, and with a choking sensation in her throat which, as soon as she reached her own room, she was fain to relieve by a burst of gasping sobs almost verging upon an hysterical attack.

She did not know how long this lasted, but it must have continued for some time, for her candle had burnt low when she regained her calmness. She looked round for the candles on her toilet-table—there was no gas in the house—but found that they had been removed. She would have rung for fresh ones, but she heard a clock in the next room chime eleven, and knew that the servants must have gone to bed. Wondering why Patience had not come near her, she remembered that there were candles in her sitting-room, and resolved to fetch them, as well as her writing materials, a half-finished letter to Geoffrey, and her diary, which she had left upon her writing-table.

She unlocked her door and turned the handle. But to turn the handle seemed to be of no use; the door would not open. Had she tampered with the lock? She was fastened in; how, she knew not, but such was the fact.

Clarice seized the bell-rope and pulled it violently, pulled it again and again till she almost fancied she heard the bell ringing. But that was impossible, for the wire had been cut an hour before.

When no response came the girl's heart began to fail her. What had happened? And as she paused, uncertain whether to cry for help, to beat at the door with her hands, or simply to go to bed and try to sleep till morning, the flame of her candle leaped, flickered, and spluttered into darkness.

Then she lost her self-possession. Her life had made her timid, and she had certainly cause for some alarm. She battered at the panels of her door with all her might; she

screamed for help, and then trembled at the sound of her weak and ineffectual cry; finally the sense of helplessness and desolation that ensued when all the noise she made proved unavailing overcame her completely, and forced her into a crouching attitude beside the door, where her screams died away into gasps and moans of fright.

And yet two people heard her. There were two persons who might have set her free at any moment if they had chosen. And these two were Mrs. Danvers and Constantine Jacobi.

When Sir Wilfred retired to his own room Jacobi went with him in order to perform the office of valet, into which he had slipped by degrees, and then to read him to sleep. But on this particular evening Sir Wilfred seemed to be so remarkably sleepy that he required no reading to lull him into slumber. By ten o'clock Jacobi had quietly returned to the drawing-room, where Mrs. Danvers sat knitting.

"Asleep so soon?" she asked, rolling up her ball of worsted.

"I should think he was. I didn't give him his tea myself for nothing. He said it had a peculiar taste."

Jacobi laughed aloud; Mrs. Danvers smiled.

"Be careful not to overdo it," she said.

"I've done it once or twice before when I wanted to examine his papers. It is safe enough; the simplest thing in the world. I meant to give it to Clarice, too, but the little fool did not drink her tea. Are you ready? Just go and listen at her door."

Mrs. Danvers went. She returned in a few minutes, as silently as if she was shod with velvet.

"Crying in her bedroom," she said. "You will be safe enough even if you make a little noise in fastening her door."

"I shall make no noise at all," said Jacobi, contemptuously. "Have the servants gone to bed?"

"Yes. I told them to go early, and their lights are out already."

"Bring a candle, then, and come with me."

Mrs. Danvers obeyed. Jacobi took off his shoes and crept stealthily up the stairs, pausing on the landing to

let her precede him with the light. They entered Clarice's sitting-room together.

From the girl's bedroom could be heard the sound of passionate sobs. She had not yet got over the misery of that humiliating evening. Jacobi listened for a moment, with a terrible smile of evil triumph on his face. Then he produced a screw-driver and a screw from his pocket, and quietly began to insert it into the door in such a manner that it could not possibly be opened from inside.

Mrs. Danvers stood by, held the candle, and listened and watched.

"Done now," said Jacobi, presently, rising from the kneeling position in which his work had been accomplished.

He took a chair into the passage, planted it against the wall, and stood upon it. Then with a sharp knife he severed the bell-wire that formed the means of communication between the servants' offices and Clarice's bedroom.

Then he returned to the sitting-room and began to make a thorough search of all places where papers could be kept. By means of false keys he ransacked every drawer and desk, while Mrs. Danvers stood by with the candle, counselling him from time to time what to take and where to look.

When the search was over he held in his hands a good many letters and papers of various kinds, and a locked book marked "Diary." The sobs in the next room were growing fainter, but they had not yet died away.

"We can read these downstairs, Antonia," said Jacobi, with a fastidious shrug of his shoulders. "*Dios!* how that girl does snivel! I shall have to cure her of that."

Mrs. Danvers put her finger on her lips.

"Don't let her hear you speak, or we shall have a fine disturbance."

"She has a devilish bad temper," remarked Jacobi.

He stole downstairs with less quietness than he had formerly observed, and Mrs. Danvers followed him to the library. They preferred this room to any other, partly because it was comfortable, and partly because they could there distinguish the peculiar creak made upon the opening of the baize door that led to the servants'

rooms, supposing that any of the servants left their own quarters. Besides, a light in the library would excite nobody's suspicion, as Jacobi generally sat there before going to bed.

"That maid of hers, Patience, won't want to go near her, will she?" asked Jacobi, seating himself.

"I dismissed her this afternoon—for rudeness to me," said Mrs. Danvers, tranquilly.

Jacobi looked at her with something like admiration.

"I never thought you would make so good a helper, Antonia," he said. "Your mother used to tell me you were stupid. Has she changed her opinion?"

"You can ask her when you see her again. You had better make haste now. We may be interrupted."

"The doors are locked," said Jacobi. "Well, here are all the letters she has received from Nigel Tremaine—unless she carries some about with her. I'll read them, and hand over anything important to you."

"I will save you the trouble, if you like. A woman likes love-letters better than a man."

"No, no; I'll look at them first," he said, rather uneasily. But one after one he threw them down upon the table, saying disdainfully, "Nothing in that. Read it, if you like."

She did read it; she read all the letters, coolly enough, a slight smile curling her lips now and then.

"Here's a letter to her brother, not finished," said Jacobi, presently. "Ah, this wants looking after. Listen, we are only just in time. This was what she meant to send off to-morrow. 'I cannot bear this life much longer. Can you save me from it, Geoffrey? Mrs. Danvers, the "companion" that papa has set over me, is no better than a spy and a jailer. As for this horrible man, Mr. Jacobi, I do not know whether I hate or fear him more. I have refrained from alarming you before, but now I cannot keep silence. He has extraordinary influence over papa, and makes him do exactly what he chooses. It is owing to him that I am shut up and guarded, and spied upon until my life is a misery to me.'"

"Hark!" said Mrs. Danvers, raising her head.

They heard the sound of repeated knocks against a

door upstairs, of a handle violently shaken, of footsteps beating against the floor.

Clarice's room was over the drawing-room, but her movements could be heard quite well by persons in the library. Then came a shrill cry for help, a succession of calls and screams, growing fainter by degrees, and gradually dying away into comparative silence. The man and woman listened with a mute gaze of apprehension at each other for some minutes. Then Mrs. Danvers spoke.

"Shall I go and put a stop to this?"

"No," said Jacobi, brutally. "Let her scream if she likes. Nobody can hear her. It will bring down her pride a bit. She has treated me like a dog. I'll pay my dainty lady out for it sometime or other. Besides, what has she to be frightened of?"

"She will rouse the servants," said Mrs. Danvers uneasily, as the noise overhead was repeated.

"Not she. Sit down, Antonia. I like to hear her. To think that a wild creature like that will be at my beck and call before long—tame as a caged canary! Pretty little thing! She's worth going through more trouble for, eh?"

"Did I sit with you to-night," said Mrs. Danvers, coldly, "to hear your raptures over Clarice Vanborough's attractions?"

"Why, no," said Jacobi, laughing quite genially, "not quite. But she is quiet enough now. You heard the letter I read you?"

"Yes."

"We must stop that correspondence."

"If you stop it altogether you will alarm both brother and lover. Put her letters under supervision; I will see that she writes nothing that will frighten them. But you must manage Sir Wilfred."

"Easily. He does not like her writing to Geoffrey so constantly."

"What letters are these?" said Mrs. Danvers, touching another packet

"Geoffrey Vanborough's. Nothing important in them. Here's my young lady's diary, full of abuse of me."

He went on reading in Clarice's book with a smile upon his lips. Mrs. Danvers took up Geoffrey's letters one by one and glanced over them.

If he had not been so deeply absorbed he would have seen that at one passage she looked up at him for a moment, then dropped her eyes again upon the letters without remark. She read the rest with great care, then rested her chin upon her hand and looked straight before her, as if deep in thought.

"There are some capital bits of description here of you and me," said Jacobi with a sneer. He turned the leaves back, and looked at the earlier pages. "Ah!" he exclaimed presently, "what does this mean?" And he read aloud from Clarice's diary:

"'November 21.—I was cruel to Joan to-day about Geoffrey's coin. Of course she has a right to wear it if she likes. I had often wondered what she wore on that little black ribbon round her neck. Of course I cannot be surprised that she loves him, though it is not likely that he cares for her. I wish he did, and then she could have gone with him to South America.'"

"I see—I see," said Jacobi, suddenly laying down the book. "Geoffrey Vanborough—Joan Darenth. What was I thinking of not to find this out before?"

"To find what out?"

"Don't be a fool, Antonia. It's plain enough that there has been some intrigue between Vanborough and that handsome girl at the farm, Joan Darenth. Don't you think so?"

She paused before answering.

"No. Clarice intimates that he does not care for her."

"She does not know—she can't tell," said Jacobi, leaning his elbows on the table and tapping his forehead with his long fingers. "Let me think. It would be a nice thing for Sir Wilfred to hear," he muttered, with a hard laugh.

"I would not say much about it if I were you," said Mrs. Danvers. "Geoffrey Vanborough is not likely to come home again, and you are not certain of the facts."

"That doesn't matter. I want just now to keep Joan Darenth out of the house. She has been too intimate

with my lady upstairs. She might write to her brother or to Geoffrey himself, or to Nigel Tremaine, for aught I know, and how would my game stand then? Here's a chance of getting rid of her once and for all. What luck I am having!"

His eyes glittered, a venomous smile played about his thin, curved lips. Mrs. Danvers watched him in silence.

"Take care the luck does not fail you from want of due precautions," she said presently.

"Oh, I am careful enough. Well, I think I have got all I want out of these papers. Where is the half-finished letter to Vanborough?"

"Here."

Jacobi took it in his hand and crushed it into a mere ball of paper. Then he smoothed it out flat upon the table.

"There. This is what you found upon the floor in its present crumpled condition. Your eye was caught by your name and mine. You thought it your duty to read it and to consult me as to whether it should be placed in Sir Wilfred's hands. I take possession of it, and think it better to lay it before Sir Wilfred. He asks our advice as to the best way of dealing with this most refractory young person. We give our advice."

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Danvers, with her wintry smile. "We give our advice—to the best of our ability. And he takes it. Listen; the clock is striking two. We had better restore the papers to their places."

The conspirators stole upstairs once more, and occupied themselves for some time in re-arranging the rifled desk and drawers. Then Jacobi unfastened the screw, and retired with a silent nod to his accomplice. Mrs. Danvers waited until he had gone downstairs; then opened the door of Clarice's bedroom. And as she did so the girl fell forward like a dead thing at her feet.

CHAPTER XVIII

SIR WILFRED'S DAUGHTER

"WHERE is Clarice?" said Sir Wilfred. "Let her be called immediately."

He was seated in the library at an earlier hour than usual. Jacobi had got him downstairs by eleven o'clock on the plea of important business. Even as he asked for his daughter the door opened to admit Mrs. Danvers and Clarice Vanborough.

The girl was leaning on her companion's arm. She looked as if she could not have walked a step without support. Her hair was loosely fastened, and its dark tendrils lay tenderly over her blue-veined forehead and shell-like ears in confusion, which heightened the pallor of her complexion and the violet circles round her eyes. Even the expression of her face was changed. Defiance and pride had given way to a look of pain and terror.

The light fell upon her countenance as Mrs. Danvers placed her in a low, cushioned seat opposite Sir Wilfred, and she saw that Jacobi was almost startled by it. He stood erect and looked anxiously at the companion. She was calmly adjusting a cushion behind Clarice's head. The girl closed her eyes and took no notice of anything before her.

"Is she ill?" said Sir Wilfred. His sight was failing, and he was less struck by her appearance than was Jacobi, but he gathered from her attitude and her silence that something was amiss.

"Miss Vanborough seems to have been taken ill in the night," said Mrs. Danvers, in a cool, indifferent tone. "I heard a sound in her room about two o'clock, and went in to see what was the matter. I found her on the floor in a fainting condition, and got her to bed. She was soon better; but she seems to have had nightmare, and talks about being fastened within her room."

"What folly is this, Clarice?" Sir Wilfred asked, angrily.

At the sound of his voice a shiver ran through the girl's frame. She unclosed her eyes and spoke almost inarticulately.

"What does she say?" said her father.

"She says," Mrs. Danvers answered, "that she is certain that she was locked within her own room. Now, that is impossible, for I opened the door myself quite easily, and the key was inside. Collect yourself, Miss Vanborough. You were half asleep, and imagined that you could not open your door, and then turned faint. That was all."

"I called for help," said Clarice, in a clearer voice. "I screamed; I shook the door. Nobody came."

"It is rather strange," said Mrs. Danvers to Sir Wilfred, "that I should not have heard Miss Vanborough if she had made the disturbance of which she speaks."

"I," said Jacobi, "was reading late in the library last night, and never heard a sound."

"May I ask what you mean, Clarice," said Sir Wilfred in his severest voice, "by trying to deceive us with so mad a story as this?"

The girl looked from one to the other of the unfriendly faces before her, wrung her hands together with a sharp, quick motion, and burst into tears.

"Good heavens!" said her father, in a low voice, turning to Jacobi with a startled face, "is she going out of her mind?"

There was a short silence, broken only by the girl's short, passionate sobs. She had caught the words, however, and presently commanded herself sufficiently to say, piteously:

"It is you who are all driving me mad. I can't help it. Why—why are you so unkind to me!"

"This, you see," said Jacobi, in Sir Wilfred's ear, "is the charge she brings against us in her letter to Captain Vanborough. She may really do serious harm if she is not checked at once.!"

Sir Wilfred assented feebly. He looked to Mrs. Danvers for assistance.

"Ask her whether she wrote this letter," he said.

"That letter," said Clarice, drying her eyes, and sitting up with new feverish vigour. "Yes, I wrote it. It is my letter to Geoffrey."

"A letter," said Jacobi, softly, "in which you complain to your brother—of us."

"Not of my father," said Clarice. "Of you—and of Mrs. Danvers—yes."

"As you have nothing to complain of, and are treated in this house with every kind of consideration," said Sir Wilfred, in an incisive tone, "the fact of your making complaints at all is an insult to me. You will henceforth write to Captain Vanborough—if you write at all—under strict supervision. You will show all your letters to Mrs. Danvers or to me. Mrs. Danvers, you will be kind enough to see that my daughter holds no correspondence with any person which you do not oversee, and you will make any arrangements that may be necessary for the carrying out of my wishes. It is very plain that she will not obey me without strict surveillance."

"I will do my best, sir," said Mrs. Danvers, glancing at Clarice.

The girl turned red and then white; she clasped her hands convulsively together, and seemed about to speak but, at an almost imperceptible sign from Jacobi, Mrs. Danvers rose and laid her hand on the arm of her young charge.

At the touch the girl's strength and spirit forsook her. She hung her head; her limbs trembled; the tears began to run down her white cheeks. Mrs. Danvers had to summon a servant to help her upstairs; and upon her bed she lay without motion or speech for the rest of the day.

Mrs. Danvers remained with her almost entirely, and when she left the room her place was supplied by one of the servants, a rough country girl called Betty Blane, already mentioned, whose stupid fidelity Mrs. Danvers had secured by a skilful blending of presents, promises, and threats. Betty Blane sat by the window knitting a rough stocking in Mrs. Danvers' absence, and did not disturb her young mistress by any attempt at speech.

There was some altercation going on downstairs. The

very servants were aware of it, and speculated as to its cause. Mrs. Danvers, excluded from the library, allowed herself when quite alone to look uneasy, and to pace her room with tightly-clasped hands and knitted brow. "He is going too fast—too far," she murmured to herself. "He was always either rash or cowardly." Then she entered Clarice's room and stood for a moment with her eyes fixed on the half-unconscious girl. "Sorry for you?" she muttered, as if replying to some suggestion from without. "Yes, I am sorry. What does that matter? One is sorry for the moth that burns itself in the candle, for the buzzing insect that one crushes, although it has done no harm; but one's sorrow makes no difference. Poor, pretty moth!" She smoothed back the curling hair from the pale forehead with a very gentle touch; but the muscles of her face did not relax from the hardness of expression. Her mouth was as rigid as if it had been carved in stone.

She met Jacobi in the library at eleven o'clock, as she often did. His face was unusually flushed, his eyes bright; his utterance was so husky that Mrs. Danvers guessed at once that he had been drinking since he left Sir Wilfred.

"It is all right so far," he assured her, twisting his long fingers in and out of each other in his satisfaction. "I am to have the felicity of calling Sir Wilfred Vanborough my father-in-law, and Geoffrey Vanborough my brother. Gilbert Vanborough, too! If little Clarice were twice the demon she is, it would be worth while securing her for the sake of giving some pain to those precious brothers of hers."

Mrs. Danvers had composedly seated herself in Sir Wilfred's chair, and spoke coolly.

"If you have got their consent, you will want my influence with Clarice."

"Of course I shall. You are not going to fight shy of the matter now, are you, Antonia?"

"No. But I have found out by degrees that you told me only half the story when I met you by accident in London, and heard that you wanted a companion for a girl in the country."

"I told you enough for all practical purposes," said Jacobi, frowning and rolling his wild, dark eyes.

"I think not. I consented to help you—on conditions of sufficient payment; but I did not bargain for half-a-dozen mysteries to which I had no clue. Trust me altogether, or I shall throw up the game."

"The game is in my own hands now," said Jacobi, with a scowl.

"No, it is not. It is in mine, because I knew you twelve years ago in Paris with your wife. Where is your wife, by-the-bye? I suppose she is not living still?"

"She died some years ago," said he, sulkily. "Your knowing me in Paris—where you did not lead the most respectable of lives yourself, Antonia—would involve no danger to me. I could do you as much harm as you could do me."

"No," said Mrs. Danvers. "I was never committed to a French prison for stabbing——"

He stopped her by a cry of rage. He stood up, his eyes flashing, his face livid, his hands clenched.

"You know that?" he said. "If you say another word, I swear I'll—I'll—kill you!"

She looked at him with cool contempt.

"You are a fool, Constantine."

The man's hands had unclenched themselves, but his face did not at once recover its natural colour. He laughed a little nervously, his lips working and his eyebrows twitching as he did so.

"You say such strong things sometimes, Antonia," he said, "that you put me into a rage. You are quite mistaken about the prison, however—quite mistaken. But what do you want to know?"

"I want to know first why Sir Wilfred quarrelled with his son Geoffrey."

"I can scarcely tell you that," he answered, and proceeded forthwith to give her the true history of the stolen cheque, and of the way in which Gilbert dreaded its becoming known.

She listened silently, and nodded when he had finished.

"Now," she said, "I begin to understand. But how did you get to know all this?"

Jacobi hesitated, then came to her side and spoke with bated breath.

"You read Geoffrey Vanborough's letters?" he said. "You saw that he mentioned a Sebastian Vallor who had attacked Tremaine?"

"You were that Sebastian Vallor," said Mrs. Danvers. "Of course I knew that when I read the letter. You did not manage to obtain Geoffrey Vanborough's confidence, I should imagine?"

Rather reluctantly he accounted for his knowledge by the story that he had "accidentally" overheard his conversation with Nigel. Mrs. Danvers heard his explanation, and took the liberty of thoroughly disbelieving it. She questioned him closely concerning the attempt at robbery, and arrived at a tolerably clear understanding of that part of the story. He could hardly mention Geoffrey Vanborough's name without a curse, as he told of his own capture and—something, not all—of his punishment.

"And did you come to England with the intention of making money out of that story?" asked Mrs. Danvers.

"I thought it might be useful. It has been useful," said Jacobi, with a slight smile.

"You had no other reason for coming to England?" she said, pertinaciously.

"Oh, dear, no. None at all," said Jacobi, thinking it best to say nothing about his connection with the Darenths.

And again Mrs. Danvers disbelieved him. But they separated upon the best of terms.

Clarice lay for nearly a week in the same listless state, and Mrs. Danvers and Betsy Blane mounted guard over her.

The time came, however, when she was able to sit up and be dressed and carried into the sitting-room. She was as weak as though she had gone through a long illness.

CHAPTER XIX

AN ENGAGEMENT OF MARRIAGE

"WELL, Clarice," said Sir Wilfred, taking the girl's wasted hand in his as she lay amongst the cushions on a sofa in the drawing-room one October afternoon, "I am glad to see you downstairs again."

"Thank you, papa." The answer was very faint.

"I wanted to speak to you on various matters—matters relating to your health and to other things," Sir Wilfred continued. "I have been, and am still, very anxious about you."

As Clarice's only answer was slowly to withdraw her hand from his, and to hide it beneath the silken coverlet which Mrs. Danvers had thrown over her, Sir Wilfred proceeded without interruption :

"I am growing old. I am not so strong as I used to be. Your brother Gilbert's delicate health makes me unwilling to throw any burden upon him. You have no other relation who can be trusted to protect you and your interests. The estate is so much encumbered that I fear that I cannot leave you so well provided as I expected to do. You understand all this ?"

She moved her lips, but no sound came from them. An expression of terror was stealing into her hollow eyes.

Then, seeing that the tears were forcing their way from beneath the girl's heavy eye-lids, he laid aside a little of his pomposity and added, with a touch of kindness :

"I tell you this for your own good, Clarice. I am not angry with you ; I only wish to protect you from the consequences of your own weakness."

"How ?" she asked, nerving herself for the question.

"In a way that, I hope, will not prove unpleasant," said her father, solemnly. "In a way which is the mere fulfilment of all girlish dreams and womanly ambitions. In short, my dear child, by marriage with a man who will save you from misapprehensions and from enforced seclusion——"

"Marriage !" she ejaculated, without waiting for the conclusion of his sentence. "With whom ?" A faint colour stole into her cheeks ; she held her breath to hear his answer.

"With one who has proved himself ever faithful to my interests," said Sir Wilfred, impressively, "a man who has ever been honest, true, conscientious, who possesses great talents, and many accomplishments, who is not biassed by any selfish views, but capable of a life-long and most generous attachment—my secretary, Constantine Jacobi."

A wild shriek of laughter rang through the room. She

threw up her arms as if struggling for breath, then burst again and again into strange paroxysms of ghastly mirth, belied by the expression of pain in her pathetic eyes.

Sir Wilfred, much alarmed, hastily rang the bell and left her abruptly to the care of Mrs. Danvers, saying only as he retired :

" I have told her what she is to do. Pray make her listen to reason."

Mrs. Danvers took a glass of cold water from the table and looked into Sir Wilfred's eyes, as if she meant to dash it over the girl's shrinking figure, but when the door was closed she laid it down again, for she saw that the laughter was already dying into strangled sobs and tears. She made her drink some sal-volatile, and applied strong smelling salts to her nostrils, but not until she was calmer did Mrs. Danvers sit down beside the sofa and suddenly draw the girl to her bosom and press her lips upon the throbbing forehead so tenderly that Clarice shrank back amazed.

" Are you sorry for me ? " she said, her poor quivering mouth hardly able to shape the words, " then I must be miserable indeed."

And with that she shed a few honest and natural tears, which Mrs. Danvers did not seek to check, and then lay quiet among her cushions for a long time, shivering now and then as a fresh thought struck her, and grasping tightly at the hand of the woman who had been given her as spy and jailer, and who seemed at that time to be her only friend. But it was not the first time that she had met with unexpected gentleness from Mrs. Danvers, and therefore it did not surprise her quite so much as it might have surprised Constantine Jacobi had he entered at that moment.

" Did you hear what he said ? " Clarice asked, at length, in a low voice.

" What Sir Wilfred said ? No ; but I think I know."

" But he can't mean it. He can't think I would ever marry a man like that. Besides, he knows—he knows—that I love Nigel with all my heart and soul. Oh, Nigel, Nigel, why don't you come and help me ? "

" My dear, you must not excite yourself."

"I can't help it."

"Do you know what they will say if you do not keep quiet and composed, and consent to what they propose?"

"Yes, I know," said Clarice, turning her face to the wall. "Papa told me. They say I am going out of my mind. Do you think I am?"

"And do you know what that signifies?" said Mrs. Danvers, steadily pursuing her argument. "It means that you might be taken away from Charnwood Manor and locked up by your friends and guardians for months and years in a madhouse. That would surely be worse for you, poor child, than giving your consent to a proposed marriage which may, after all, be averted in a thousand ways! Better to yield; better go with the current, and save yourself in that way."

Clarice gazed at her with horror-stricken eyes.

"Do you think," she said, slowly, "that they mean to do that? Must I consent, or will they be so cruel?"

"You must consent," said Mrs. Danvers, firmly.

"But Nigel—Nigel! I have promised to be his wife."

"You will never be his wife if you are shut up in a lunatic asylum," said her companion. "He would never be able to find you there. Do you know what a private lunatic asylum is like? You are quite sane enough at present to be guided by a sensible person; but, of course, if you were shut up in a mad-house there would be no chance for you. In six weeks you would be a raving lunatic. Your mind is not strong enough to bear continued contact with mad people."

Clarice closed her eyes tightly, as if to shut out the fearful vision conjured up by these words.

"Believe me," said Mrs. Danvers, earnestly, "I am counselling you for your own good, Clarice Vanborough."

The girl opened her eyes wide, and fixed them on Mrs. Danvers' face.

"Can anything be for my good," she wailed, "when everybody I love is torn away from me? First, my mother and my little sister; and now both my brothers—for Geoffrey will never come back, and they say that he is wicked, and Gilbert has cast me off! And now you are taking Nigel from me, and I shall never, never be his wife."

She said no more, and Mrs. Danvers thought it better not to press the subject.

She went about the house looking deathly pale, with a scared expression in her great dark eyes, but she made no further appeal to her father or to Mrs. Danvers. She allowed Jacobi to place a diamond ring on the third finger of her left hand, and accepted his attentions in passive silence. She did not even wince when Sir Wilfred solemnly kissed her on the forehead, and told her that he hoped soon to see her a happy wife.

CHAPTER XX

BURNETT LYNN'S TESTIMONY

"Is the mail in?" asked Geoffrey Vanborough, with a touch of eagerness in his usually lazy voice.

"It does not bring you much," Nigel Tremaine responded. "One letter only, while I have a budget."

"One!" said Geoffrey, catching the envelope which his friend tossed to him. "One! Not a Charnwood letter either. London postmark."

"A dun whom you forgot," said Tremaine, as he quickly perused his own letters from home.

The two friends were on the point of a change of plan. Geoffrey had gone through his training upon the *estancia* of a clever Scotchman, who had almost the largest grazing farm in the country, and Nigel was trying to induce him to purchase some land for himself, as the Tremaine money was always available, and Vanborough could repay it—"with compound interest if he chose," said Nigel—when his sheep farm began to be profitable. At present, however, Geoffrey was hesitating as to his future course, and had come with Tremaine to Buenos Ayres to consult a friend—this friend being the doctor whose acquaintance they had made on the Pampas, Oliver Burnett Lynn.

After some moments' silence, Geoffrey picked up the letter and opened it.

The envelope was a thin, common-looking one; the

paper was of the cheapest and flimsiest kind. And the words ran as follow :

“ TO MR. GEOFFREY VANBOROUGH.

“ Why do you stay so long out of England ? Why did you leave Clarice to the mercy of a man like Constantine Jacobi, who is now acting as your father's secretary ? He means to marry her in the Spring ; he has Sir Wilfred's and Gilbert's willing consent, and hers too ; but I can prove to you that his wife, whom he deserted seven years ago, is still living. Gilbert cannot and will not interfere—he is in Jacobi's power. Come back at once. You will not be harmed about the cheque, and your presence is absolutely necessary. Don't let Mr. Tremaine come alone ; he will do no good without you. Clarice is not mad, as some people say, but she is breaking her heart.

“ ONE WHO KNOWS ALL ABOUT IT.”

Geoffrey dashed the paper down with something very like an oath. His face was white with rage. He could not speak intelligibly, but he pointed to the letter with a gesture which justified Nigel in taking it up and examining it.

He read it through twice without a word. Then he looked at the envelope, at the address—which was in ordinary writing—then at the letter again. By this time Geoffrey, who had been pacing up and down the room with an amount of heat and anger very unusual in him, was ready to stop and look into his friend's face.

“ Well ? ” he said, impatiently.

Nigel's face was slightly flushed, but unruffled. He even laughed a little as he met Geoffrey's eager eyes.

“ Well ? ” he repeated, “ what do you suppose I am likely to say to an impudent lie of that kind ? ”

His words were perhaps strong, but they were uttered with the most perfect tranquillity. He took out a cigarette and lighted it with deliberate indifference, which would have deceived anybody but Geoffrey. Perhaps Geoffrey, only, would have noticed that his hand was slightly—very slightly—unsteady, and knew that this

coolness of demeanour was the result of self-control and not of insensibility.

"Who can have written it?" said Geoffrey.

"That I can't tell. You are more likely to know than I."

"I don't know in the least. What shall we do?"

"You can do nothing but write letters, which will probably not be read," said Nigel, coolly. "I myself shall start at once for Charnwood."

"I think," said Geoffrey, "I had better go with you."

"Go with me? I hope you will do nothing of the kind."

"I think I must. If the letter is written by a person who really knows what is going on—and no person ignorant of the family affairs could have written it—I ought to pay some attention——"

"Attention, yes!" said Nigel, almost sharply. "But you need not break your word to Sir Wilfred and run your head into the lion's mouth for an anonymous letter! I expect that the letter will turn out a lie from beginning to end. And what a fool you will look coming over to England and running such a risk for so slight a reason."

"Who talks of going to England?" said another voice, with a slight American accent, and Doctor Burnett Lynn's dark, thin face appeared in the doorway. "Not Vanborough?"

"Look here," said Geoffrey, taking the paper out of Nigel's hands. "You know enough of our history to understand the drift of this. Tell us whether you think it is genuine or not."

Burnett Lynn, as he was invariably called, cast his eye over the writing with an inquiring lift of his eyebrows. He read it twice before he spoke, just as Nigel had done.

"Well, I'm ready to give advice. What kind do you want?"

He spoke lightly enough, but there was an expression of keen interest in his hard, clearly-cut face, as he turned it towards Geoffrey.

"Do you think that letter is genuine?" said Nigel, as Vanborough did not speak.

"Is it easy for me to judge when I do not know the facts? Are the statements true?"

"Some of them may be."

"Which, for example?"

"We are in your own position," said Vanborough, looking up. "We do not know the facts. We do not know whether my sister has given her consent to this engagement or not."

"I wish you would speak for yourself and not for me," said Nigel, suddenly. The doctor shot a sudden humorous glance at him, but Vanborough went on unmoved.

"Of course we know nothing of this Jacobi, except that he has established himself at Charnwood as my father's secretary during the last ten or twelve months. He may have a wife living, or he may not; we have no grounds upon which to accuse him. We only know that it is not so long ago since my sister was engaged to my friend Tremaine; and we do not think it likely that she has changed her mind."

"Why has he a hold on your brother?" said Burnett Lynn, looking at the letter in his hand.

"I don't know."

"And what is the cheque?"

Geoffrey hesitated. His cheek flushed through its sunburnt hue as he finally answered:

"I told you once—partly—why I left England. It was a matter concerning a cheque. You will excuse my not going into details. It was simply a family matter."

"Just so. I did not mean to ask indiscreet questions. Then the letter is either a tissue of falsehoods, or a collection of very startling facts. And you don't exactly know which?"

"We rather incline," said Nigel, "to the theory of its being a tissue of falsehoods."

"Naturally you do," said Burnett Lynn, with the faintest possible trace of a stress upon the personal pronoun. "Is that all you can tell me?"

"All."

"Then allow me to ask a question or two. This man's name is Constantine Jacobi, I see. Have you ever received any description of him? Any account of his nationality?"

"No. I think he is a Spaniard," said Geoffrey, doubtfully.

"When did he first appear at your home—Charnwood?"

"About last February or March."

The doctor deliberated. "Yes, the time would fit," he said, thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?"

"Wait a minute. It seems to me that I am going to figure in your melodrama as a sort of *deus ex machina*, after all. I knew a man once, called Constantine Jacobi, under rather peculiar circumstances."

And then Oliver Burnett Lynn gave his hearers a concise account of a certain shipwreck off the North American coast, when Constantine Jacobi had saved himself and deserted his wife and child, a written account of which is prefixed to the present story, just as he, long afterwards, wrote it down in an amplified form at a friend's request. It is needless to say that he gave no hint, in his present account, of the relations he had had with Jacobi's wife; he said merely that he had seen her seven years ago, and that every Christmas he received a line or two from an eminent firm of solicitors in New York informing him, "at a client's request," that Maddalena Jacobi was alive and well.

"Now," he said, "I'm going to speak of what will seem to you a different subject altogether. You remember when I saw you first?"

"Yes—when Tremaine was wounded."

"You remember that you told me the story of Vallor's attack upon Tremaine? I remarked to you then that I had known a disreputable man of that name. But I did not then tell you that the Vallor I knew went under the name of Constantine Jacobi. You may also remember that Vallor declared that he was the brother of the man who married Maddalena, and that she had certainly perished in the wreck. Now, we know that she had not perished in the wreck. And the fact that a man calling himself Constantine Jacobi has turned up at Charnwood, looks to me as if he were the Constantine Vallor who deserted his wife upon the wreck, and who, I am convinced—though I cannot be sure—was the very Sebastian Vallor who tried to rob and murder our friend Tremaine."

He ceased. Vanborough and Tremaine were looking

at each other. Geoffrey's face was reddened with anger ; his eyes seemed to shoot fire as he spoke—for he was the first to find his voice.

"If that is the fellow who is trying to marry my sister, I'll shoot him down as I would a dog."

"No," said Nigel, very quietly. "You'll leave him to me, if you please."

His face, on the contrary, had grown pale, but there was a vein upon his forehead that scarcely showed except in moments of strong excitement ; it stood out like a knotted cord. His eyes were no longer blue ; they looked black in the shadow of his bent brows. Burnett Lynn glanced at him, and pronounced him in his own mind far more "dangerous" than Geoffrey Vanborough. He had the look of a man who would never relent and never forgive.

"Well," said the doctor, after a little silence, during which he had turned away and let the two friends compose themselves—when he looked round again Nigel was standing with his hand on Geoffrey's shoulder and Geoffrey was sitting with his chin upon his hands and an ugly frown on his forehead—"I have given you a weapon, if you know how to use it. Go to England and identify him."

"You couldn't identify him, you know, old fellow," said Geoffrey, quite gently, although his face did not relax. "You never saw Vallor face to face."

"But you could," said Burnett Lynn.

"Yes, I could," said Geoffrey. Then, to Tremaine again, in the same reasonable tones—"I must go myself, you see, Nigel."

"I suppose you could not come to England just now?" said Nigel, addressing himself to Burnett Lynn. "You know neither of us can identify him as the Jacobi of the shipwreck. But you might do that."

"Can't leave under a month," said the doctor. "If it's necessary, I would come then. But it won't be necessary. Vanborough will see whether he is the Vallor who attacked you, and will denounce him to Sir Wilfred. There will then surely be no question about the marriage."

"My father will hardly accept my testimony," said Geoffrey.

"But the clergyman will," said Burnett Lynn, prac-

tically. "If there is no other way you must take the bull by the horns and stop the wedding. Say there is an impediment. I'll make a statement and have it witnessed before a magistrate, if you like, and send it with you. They'll accept documentary evidence, of course. And I'll write to those New York lawyers, and tell them to communicate, if possible, with Madame Jacobi, wherever she may be. You can at any rate delay the marriage in this way; and if you find the evidence insufficient, wire to me, and I'll come per next steamer. I conclude that it isn't absolutely necessary for me to go now, is it?"

Tremaine hesitated, and looked at Vanborough. If Burnett Lynn would go Geoffrey might stay. And Nigel was uneasy about Geoffrey's going.

"It is not necessary," said Vanborough, firmly. "Thank you, Burnett Lynn. I should not be satisfied without going myself, Nigel. I'll run the risk. Now, let us go and secure our passages for Thursday."

CHAPTER XXI

HER LAST APPEAL

MRS. DANVERS had done her work well with Clarice. She accepted in silence any allusions made to the approaching wedding on the twelfth day of January. She looked with cold indifference, indeed, but without any outburst of anger or grief, at the preparations making for her future life. Dresses, linen, jewellery, all came down from London in abundance. Sir Wilfred had no wish that his daughter should not be well provided for. The wedding was to be strictly private, and Jacobi would then take his bride away for a week or two, if she were well enough to travel; but their absence was not to be further prolonged, as Sir Wilfred did not like to be left alone. Jacobi and Clarice were then to take up their abode permanently at Charnwood Manor.

It was on the tenth of January that Mrs. Danvers sought out the servant, Martin, nearly the only one of the old servants who had been retained.

"Martin," she said, softly, "has the *Times* come?"

The *Times* did not arrive until five o'clock in the afternoon at the village of Charnwood.

"I'll see, ma'am; I think it has."

And in a few minutes Martin handed her the newspaper, freshly opened and uncut. Mrs. Danvers thanked him pleasantly, and took it up to her own room. Here she unfolded the paper and found a certain column, down which she ran her finger eagerly. A look of disappointment crossed her face. She sighed heavily.

"Not yet!" she murmured to herself. "Surely—surely they would not hesitate! And what if they are too late!"

And then she fell into a deep musing fit, from which she did not rouse herself for full twenty minutes. Then she quietly re-folded the paper, carried it downstairs, and placed it on the library table, where it looked as if nobody had yet touched it.

The house was shut up at an early hour. Sir Wilfred went to bed at nine o'clock, Mrs. Danvers professed herself fatigued and retired early. Jacobi had ensconced himself in Sir Wilfred's study; there was a chair that he liked, and a bright fire; the drawing-room was rather cold. He had had some disagreeable sensations of illness during the day, which he generally combated by means of opium, but he had not felt it prudent to take it before evening. Now that night had come he mixed his accustomed dose of laudanum with some brandy, and resolved to go to his own room in a few minutes; but as he was cold, and as he knew that the laudanum would not take effect for some little time, he meant to rest first for half-an-hour by the fire. He took out a bunch of keys from his pocket, and pulled the writing-table closer to the chair, then applied one of the keys to the lock of Sir Wilfred's desk, and was just about to open it, when a knock came to the door.

Hastily pushing back the desk, he stood up and called: "Come in."

Remembering that he had locked the door, he strode across the room and opened it, then started back in surprise.

The visitor was Clarice Vanborough.

She looked at him for a minute, and her pale face

flushed slightly. He bowed, and held the door open for her with an affectation of politeness which did not well disguise the ugly sneer upon his face. The man's base mind could not attribute any higher motive for this visit than that she wanted to cajole him into a good temper. Clarice let him close the door and advance towards the table, still with the false smile upon his face, without speaking. Finally he broke the silence.

"May I ask what has procured me the pleasure of this visit?" he said, as he offered her a chair.

She rested her clasped hands on the table and looked down at them. "A pleasure?" she said, slowly. "It is no pleasure to me."

"Your courtesy overwhelms me," Jacobi responded, sardonically. He waited with some anxiety for her next speech or movement. But he reflected, although Clarice Vanborough might be capable, in a moment of excitement, of a sudden passionate deed by which she should free herself for ever from a hated tyranny, she was hardly likely to commit any violence. She was an English girl, he remembered, with the quiet habits and instincts of English life; not a Mexican half-caste, with a dagger underneath her dress, or a wild Spanish Indian ready to lie in wait with poison and steel for an enemy. There was a little silence before she spoke, and then she raised her dark eyes to his face with a singular lustre in them.

"You will not guess why I have come," she said. "It is to throw myself on your mercy. I have appealed to everybody else in vain. Now, as a last resource, I come to you. I want you to set me free. I have tried to do as my father bade me. I have tried to put the memory of Nigel Tremaine away from me, and I have tried in vain. I cannot banish him from my heart, although he is banished from my life. You would not wish to marry a woman who has no love for you? You would not wish me to marry you against my will?"

Jacobi stood still and looked at her, a slight smile stealing over his dark and subtle face. There was something in the spectacle of her distress which seemed to please him.

"Speak," she said, quickly—almost imperatively. "My father says you are a gentleman—you have a man's

heart, at any rate, have you not ? You do not want to make me wretched ? You will have pity—you must have pity ! Why should you make me miserable all my life ? I will bless you with my whole heart and soul if you will but let me go. My father will not listen to me, but you will ; you will help me ; you cannot refuse."

She clasped her hands ; her dark eyes shone through tears ; she almost knelt to him for mercy. She would have knelt had he not startled her from her intention by a low laugh of cruel triumph and insolent scorn.

"What ! " he said, " you have treated me like a dog for the last six months, and now sue to me for pity ? Ah, this is good ! this is good ! The best part of the play is just beginning. Go on, Miss Vanborough ; pray let me hear all that you have to say ; I like it."

He rubbed his hands ; a restless light glittered in his eyes ; a red flush had risen to his sallow cheeks.

"Did I treat you badly ? I did not mean to hurt you," said Clarice, with something of the *naïveté* of a child. "I did not know what I was doing. But it is not my fault that I cannot love you." And then a wave of strong womanly feeling swept away the childish inclination to evade the difficulty of answering him. "You are base, you are cruel, if you think of marrying me now," she said. "You know that it would be perjury for me to swear at the altar that I would be a loving wife to you till death ! Death ? God help me ! Death would part us very soon if ever I had to give that promise ! How could I bear to live ? But you could save me—you could give me back my happiness and my life. And surely, surely, you will."

Jacobi's smile of satisfaction still played upon his lips. He walked to the door, turned the key in the lock, and placed it in his pocket.

"I've got you now, my fine lady, have I ? Then you shall hear what I have to say. Oh, I'll do you no harm ; but you have a trick of slipping out of the room when I want to say a word to you, which I think I have prevented. Now, we can settle the matter, once and for all. You little fool," he said, suddenly dropping his light tone, and speaking with a concentrated fury that made the girl turn pale and shrink away from him with fear, "do you suppose that

I am going to let you out of my power before I've made my fortune by you? Do you suppose that by a few tears and soft words you can persuade me to surrender the prize I have worked so hard to gain? I don't marry you because I love you, but because I want money, because I want your father's house and lands. I like to hear you beg me to set you free. Oh! you will cry for mercy again before I've done with you—you will be punished for your behaviour during the last few months as soon as the ring is on your finger. I shall soon have you as much in my power as I have your brother Gilbert, your father Sir Wilfred, and as I should have your precious brother Geoffrey, if he were here. What do I care whether you are happy or not?"

Something in Clarice's face warned him that she was about to cry for help. He sprang forward and placed his hand over her mouth.

"You need not make a noise," he said. "The only person who could hear you is your father, and he would believe my version of your reasons for coming here sooner than your own. Did you come to murder me, or to make love to me? Which should I say? It is eleven o'clock at night, and everybody ought to be in bed. What is Antonia Danvers about that she does not keep you under lock and key? Now, scream at your peril."

She did not try to scream. She felt that a deadly faintness was taking possession of her—she would have fallen to the ground had he not placed her in a chair. When the sick dizziness passed off she found that he had moved away and was still talking, but talking more to himself than to her. There was a curious glibness in his speech, a curious oratorical fluency of which she was conscious, without understanding its cause. But anyone versed in the use of opium would have seen at once that its stimulant power was approaching its height. The pupils of his eyes were contracted—a vacant glitter had taken the place of their former eager and restless movement—a slight dew of perspiration was visible on his forehead. He had ceased to notice her presence in the room. She looked—she listened; but she did not dare to move or speak. For the moment she firmly believed that he was mad.

CHAPTER XXII

THE FLIGHT

"SHE was a fool to come to me," said Jacobi, standing in the middle of the room, with the fixed light in his eyes growing brighter. "Why should she think I should help her? Help her to ruin myself? Why," he said, turning to her, as if suddenly reminded of her presence, "don't you know what a chance your brothers have given me? After hearing Geoffrey acknowledge—or as good as acknowledge the truth—to Tremaine, on that night when I lay in their tent unknown to both of them, what an ass I should have been not to take advantage of it? It was not worth while to go to the Darenths for help—small farmers only—though I am their 'cousin by marriage,' as they call it. When Fate puts such weapons in one's hand, why not use them?"

Much of this was unintelligible to Clarice, but she listened, with a vague sense that he was now expounding the true motives for his conduct, if only she had the clue to guide her to the heart of the mystery. He walked up and down the room, and began to talk again.

"When we are married," he said, with a strange smile upon his face, "I will tell my wife—my wife—it sounds well!—my wife—I will tell her the story. She will not dare to make it public, even for the sake of clearing Geoffrey—no, it would implicate her father too much—'compounding a felony' is the word, isn't it?—besides Gilbert! *Dios!* How a man could sacrifice himself in that way for another is what I cannot understand. However, I have the proofs."

He went to the table and turned the desk towards him. The keys still hung from the lock. He opened the desk.

"Why did Sir Wilfred keep them?" he said, as he touched the spring which opened a secret drawer. "To hold them over Geoffrey's head?—prosecute him if he came back to England?"

He had got hold of some papers now ; his speech was growing incoherent ; he forgot sometimes to finish his sentences.

" If he came back, I would make Sir Wilfred prosecute, too. The story would all come out—in the papers—what a scandal for the neighbourhood—Antonia says it would break Clarice's—— What if it did ? Yes, the proofs are all here. Sir Wilfred does not often look—never know if I took them—safer with me than with him——"

He paused, as if irresolute. He was holding in his hand a large envelope, unsealed, as Clarice could see, with a superscription in Sir Wilfred's hand. He held it up once, then laid it down upon the table.

" What would Geoffrey say," he murmured, slowly, " if he knew that I had the papers in my hand that would ruin the credit of the whole family if—if—I chose to use them ? Ah ! Sir Wilfred's keys—left about once too often—I have my own now."

He took up the keys and fingered them triumphantly ; produced another bunch, containing a skeleton key, which he also laid upon the table, and then the door-key. He removed the envelope from the drawer, and put it into his pocket ; then seemed to change his mind, pulled it out and looked at it attentively. His eyes wandered about the room and fell upon Clarice, standing in the shadow of a curtain which she had drawn partially round her. His face brightened a little.

" Take it, Antonia," he said. " You had better hide it while I am away. Put blank paper in the envelope ; take the papers into your own room. He will never know. Nobody will know but—but—you and me."

Clarice took the envelope from his hand and hid it in her dress.

He looked round distressfully as if in search of something. His eyes were growing heavy ; the light in them had died away.

" I think I had better take my dose of opium," he said, " and go to bed. I am very sleepy."

He walked a few steps aimlessly, and arrived at a sofa which had recently been brought into the room for Sir

Wilfred's benefit. He sat down upon it, rose, and looked vacantly about him. "I am not sure about the papers," he said. He sat down again; his head fell backward upon the sofa-cushions; in another moment he was fast asleep.

Some of his last words had given Clarice a key to the situation. He had been taking opium in a large dose, evidently expecting no disturbance until morning; and his actions for the last hour had all been committed under the influence of that drug. Now was her time to take advantage of his unconsciousness for escape. And for anything else?

He had given her the very suggestion she wanted. She moved stealthily to the table, took out from the envelope two or three folded papers, selected some sheets of paper that bore a resemblance to those that she had abstracted and placed them in the envelope. Then she laid the envelope again within the drawer; but, before doing so, she glanced at the writing upon it. She saw these words in Sir Wilfred's handwriting:

"Papers relative to the cause of Geoffrey Vanborough's departure from England in the year 1877. In case of my death, to be forwarded to him, unread, by my executors; in case of his death before mine, to be burnt unread. June 10, 1877."

Clarice remembered that this was the date of Geoffrey's visit to Beechfield, on that memorable night when she had promised to be Nigel's wife, and Geoffrey had called upon her to trust in him.

The drawer closed easily. She could not have opened it again if she had tried. She closed the desk, locked it, and placed it in its old position on the table. Then she put the keys in a little bunch on the table by the desk.

"He will think that he closed and locked it," she said to herself. "He will not suspect me."

She looked round the room. The lamp was burning brightly, full in Jacobi's face. She turned it down so as to leave only the faintest possible glimmer of light. Then she stepped lightly to the door with the door key in her hand. It grated as she turned it in the lock; but the noise failed to arouse the sleeper. She opened the door, and

stood outside in the dark and silent passage with the papers in her hand.

What was now to be done ? Should she go quietly back to her own room and sleep as if nothing had happened, with these papers in her possession ? She knew well enough that every nook and corner of her room was open to Mrs. Danvers' survey, that even her toilette would, during the next two days, be subjected to diligent supervision. Where could she hide those papers, so as to prevent their falling again into Jacobi's hands ? She dare not trust her father ; she dare not give them to any member of the household ; she dare not keep them herself.

She did not stay to examine them. Had she done so, it is likely that she would have failed to comprehend their bearing. Her whole soul was absorbed in the thought of their concealment.

She made her way downstairs and into the corridor that ran down the side of the house. A cold breeze made her shiver as she passed one of the doors. She stood still, turned in at the door, and saw that the window of the empty room had been left slightly open. And then a course of action presented itself to her mind. She would leave the house, give the papers into a friend's safe keeping, and make one desperate effort to escape from Jacobi's clutches. If she could once gain Beechfield—Nigel's house—Mrs. Tremaine would take her in, and she would be safe. What if seven weary miles of darkness lay between her and her lover's home ? Her fleet feet had often traversed a longer distance, with Nigel at her side.

It was the first time for months that she had not been carefully guarded, and prevented from leaving her room. Mrs. Danvers' watch seemed to have relaxed its severity. The fact was, she had thought that Clarice's exhaustion was too great to allow her to dream of leaving her own room ; and, but for the girl's state of febrile excitement, this supposition would have been true. But at present she knew no fatigue, she feared no danger. Her whole soul was absorbed in the prospect of flight from her father's house.

She wrapped a cloak which she found in the hall round her, and raised the window sash. It made considerable

noise, and was stiff besides. At first her delicate fingers, numbed already with January cold, and trembling from agitation, almost failed to move it at all. When thrown wide, it was easy enough for her to mount upon the window-sill and let herself lightly down upon the soft earth of the flower-bed outside. As Clarice stopped short, and considered which way she should take, she heard a distant clock strike :

One !

She shivered, more from apprehension than from cold. What was she doing in the middle of the night, alone, outside her father's house ? If the vision of Jacobi, as a living, breathing, hideously familiar human being had been one whit less present with her, she would, even at that moment, have renounced her expedition and gone back to her own room. But her horror of him overcame even her natural timidity.

She carried out her purpose, and hurried on with throbbing heart and trembling limbs. Past Darenth's farm—the Hillside Farm, as it was generally called—wound at some little distance the road to Beechfield.

Clarice felt her strength and courage fail her as she toiled up the ascent. "I shall never, never reach Beechfield," she moaned at length, as she stopped, panting and exhausted. "Well, better to die on the roadside than live to marry that wicked man."

But a new thought now occurred to her. Would not Joan Darenth help her on her way ? Would not Joan Darenth shelter her in the farmhouse for a time ? Would she not, for Geoffrey's sake, help to conceal the wretched papers that might work his ruin ? Heart and brain were alike failing her ; she could go little further ; but Joan—faithful, trusty, noble-hearted Joan—would do for her all that she could not do for herself. And again she roused herself and dragged her weary feet in the direction of Darenth's farm.

Each step grew more and more painful and difficult to her. She had heard the clock strike two as she passed through the village ; how long she was in making her way to the farm she could not tell. By and by, however, she toiled up the garden walk, reached the porch, and sank

down upon the wooden settle, numb, cold, powerless, but not entirely without consciousness. How she was to make her presence known she could not tell. Nobody was stirring, and she had not strength to knock or call.

Before five o'clock Joan was downstairs, moving actively about, as was her wont. She had unfastened the shutters and lit the fire before Seth appeared; he, like herself, being an early riser. He unfastened the door, and then called out hastily:

"Why, here's a tramp, Joan!"

But to his amaze the figure lifted its head and he recognised the wan, worn face as the face of his master's daughter. She rose to her feet by a supreme effort and staggered past him into the kitchen, where Joan dropped the cup she had in her hand with a cry of amaze and terror.

"Miss Clarice!" And then with a rush of pity and surprise, "My dear, my darling, how did you get here?"

She took Clarice into her arms and held her close. Then the girl tried to speak, and forced the papers into her hand.

"They are—for Geoffrey," she said. "You must keep them—till he asks you—for them. Nobody else—nobody else—must know. You will keep them safe—quite safe? His honour is in your hands now. Nothing is safe with me."

"I will keep them safe for him," said Joan, with grave assurance.

She felt, in seeing Clarice's anxious eyes and haggard face, as well as by the hearing of her words, that the matter must be of vital importance, and she gave the pledge required—in Seth's hearing.

Then Clarice forgot that she had meant to ask for aid, forgot that she was flying from home and must not linger on the way, forgot to explain her presence, forgot everything but a sense of relief and protection and sudden bodily weakness, and fainted away in Reuben Darenth's kitchen without a word that could put her friends upon their guard.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WEDDING MORNING

JACOBI'S sleep lasted until seven in the morning, and then he was awakened by a loud knock at the study door and the sudden entrance of Mrs. Danvers with a candle in her hand.

"Are you here?" she said, in an agitated voice. "I've been to your room and could not find you. I almost thought—where is Clarice?"

"Clarice?" he repeated, in a stupefied, drowsy way. "How am I to know where Clarice is?"

Mrs. Danvers noticed the disorder of his dress, the languor of his attitude, with a quick, observant eye. "Have you been sleeping here all night?" she said.

"I suppose I have. I am wretchedly cold. I must have fallen asleep on the sofa," said Jacobi, rising and looking round him with a yawn. "What do you want?"

"I have bad news for you. Clarice is not in the house."

"Not in the house!" Jacobi gazed at her for a moment with wide-open eyes, then stamped violently on the floor and uttered a savage oath. "Where is she, then?"

"How can I tell? She was in her room last night."

"No, she was not; she came here."

"Here!"

"Came and had some conversation with me. She left me about twelve o'clock—or a little later," said Jacobi, beginning to speak slowly, and to endeavour to recollect as much as possible of last night's scene. "It's your fault," he said, turning upon Mrs. Danvers with an accent of unmistakable rage. "You have played me false; you did not watch her as you ought to have done. Why did you not lock her in her room?"

"I thought I had done so," said Mrs. Danvers, looking uneasy. "I will set the servants to work; we may find some traces of her in the garden. You had better change

your clothes and come downstairs, too. Was she begging you to break the engagement when she came last night?"

Jacobi nodded, sullenly.

Mrs. Danvers, as she neared the door, looked back over her shoulder.

"Then I hope we shall not find her at the bottom of the pond," she said, significantly.

A servant met her on the stairs.

"Farmer Darenth's daughter wants to speak to you, ma'am. It's something about Miss Clarice, I believe."

Mrs. Danvers stopped short.

"Where is she?"

"In the hall, ma'am."

"Tell her to come to the housekeeper's room; I will see her there."

Scarcely a glimmer of light came in at the window of the little room whither Joan was shown. She had to wait a few minutes for the arrival of Mrs. Danvers, to whom she had thought it best to apply. At last Mrs. Danvers entered, with the candle still in her hand. She was suffering from the cold of the early winter morning, as well as from her anxiety about Clarice, and she had drawn a pale blue woollen shawl round her head and face in going about the passages. She was out of breath, too, and her voice was rough and hoarse with suppressed emotion as she inquired, eagerly:

"Have you heard anything of Miss Vanborough?"

"She came to our house this morning, ma'am," said Joan, gravely, "and I do not know how long she has been out of doors. Fortunately the weather was not very cold. She was in a faint for a long time, and we took the liberty of sending for Dr. Ambrose almost at once, and as soon as I could leave her I came away here. I am afraid her mind is wandering."

Mrs. Danvers sank into a chair, and put her handkerchief to her eyes.

"The poor child! So soon before her wedding, too! Sir Wilfred will be much obliged to you for your care."

"We are glad to do all that we can do for Miss Clarice," said Joan, simply. She looked at Mrs. Danvers as she spoke, with no great sympathy; she did not like what

she had heard of her, and she thought this display of emotion a little overstrained and forced. "She is quite welcome to stay with us until she can safely be moved."

"I will go and speak to Sir Wilfred," said Mrs. Danvers, softly, and then she glided from the room without another word of thanks or recognition of the trouble Joan had taken. The girl waited in some perplexity for nearly half-an-hour, and at last made an expedition into the kitchen, where she asked old Martin whether Mrs. Danvers wanted to see her again.

"Why, bless me," said the old man, testily, "don't you know that Mrs. Danvers and Mr. Jacobi started ten minutes ago in the close carriage for your father's farm? You must have heard the carriage go round to the door."

"No, I did not hear," said Joan, with a curious sinking at heart. This was surely a hard way in which to be treated in Geoffrey Vanborough's home!

She left the house, and made the best of her way back to the farm. The Vanboroughs' carriage and Doctor Ambrose's gig were both standing at the gate. When she entered the house she found Jacobi and Doctor Ambrose engaged in some discussion as to the advisability of removing Clarice back to Charnwood Manor. Jacobi had authority from Sir Wilfred to decide on the best course, and he wished her to be removed at once. The doctor demurred a little; he was not quite sure whether the change would be for Clarice's good; but finally he consented to it. And Mrs. Danvers sat by, listening to the discussion, but scarcely saying a word.

Clarice was wrapped in blankets and lifted into the carriage. She seemed unconscious of the change of place thus effected, and did not recognise any of the faces around her—only muttered to herself, and looked vacantly before her. Joan, who had been busy adjusting shawls and rugs around her, stooped to kiss the pale, suffering face before she left the carriage. As her lips touched Clarice's cheek a gleam of intelligence shot into the girl's lustreless eyes. She roused herself a little, looked at Joan's pitying face, and uttered one word in a very different manner from the one with which her disconnected murmurings had hitherto been accompanied.

"Remember!" she said suddenly, with a sharp note of warning in her voice, and a look of complete recollection and entreaty. "Remember!" And then she sank back, smiled, and fell to muttering to herself once more, with fingers plucking at the shawl that Joan had wrapped around her.

Mrs. Danvers exchanged a sharp glance with Jacobi as she took Clarice's head upon her lap. He scowled as he glanced at Joan. He suspected her already of knowing more of the true state of things than she ought to know.

He took the vacant place in Doctor Ambrose's gig, and the doctor went with Clarice and Mrs. Danvers in the carriage. No explanation of Clarice's appearance at the farm could be given—nobody knew why or when she had left the house. Even Jacobi could only suspect that his refusal to set her free had driven her to despair; but he was certain of nothing.

For some time it was doubtful whether brain-fever would not supervene. The preparations for the marriage were suspended; a physician was summoned from London. But in a few days this danger seemed to be completely averted, and the girl's elastic, if feeble, constitution triumphed. The physician declared that her restoration to bodily health was probable, but he doubted the entire re-establishment of mental health. Only very favourable conditions, and great freedom from care and anxiety, he said, could ensure that.

But in a fortnight from the time of Clarice's attempt at escape it was announced that she was well enough to come downstairs.

Jacobi began to think that Mrs. Danvers made an unnecessary fuss about Clarice's health. He was half inclined to suspect her of wishing to postpone the marriage.

Under these circumstances he took matters boldly into his own hands. First he quarrelled with Dr. Ambrose, and forced Sir Wilfred to quarrel with him too. And then he pressed the question of the wedding-day, and finally informed Mrs. Danvers, with scant ceremony, that he had made all arrangements for the performance of the marriage-rite, and that it must and should take place at Charnwood Church that very week. There were three

days in which to prepare Clarice's mind, and he would not brook another hour's delay.

"Have you told her?" he asked, later in the day.

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing."

"Did she not cry?"

"No. I think she is past crying."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think she understood me. But you know," said Mrs. Danvers, with an odd smile, "that that does not matter."

"No," said Jacobi, rather hesitatingly. "Though, if a man must marry, he would prefer not to marry a mad woman."

"She is the easier disposed of afterwards. Take courage; a sane woman might give you more trouble."

And then Mrs. Danvers left him to his own reflections, with the same curious smile upon her lips.

Clarice came downstairs that evening, but seemed to take little notice of anyone. Even when Jacobi spoke to her she scarcely raised her eyes or gave any sign of dislike. He commented on this fact to Mrs. Danvers with some show of triumph afterwards.

And thus the three days passed by, and Clarice's wedding-morning came.

It was Thursday, the first of February, and the first touch of Spring was visible in the fields and on the hedges.

The wedding was to be managed with all possible quietness. It had not even been thought necessary to send Jacobi away, that he might make his appearance from the village inn instead of from the house itself. Mr. Hilton would be at the church at ten; Sir Wilfred and his daughter would drive thither together; another carriage would take Jacobi and Mrs. Danvers.

At half-past nine Clarice sat before the looking-glass in her own room, while Mrs. Danvers fastened the veil upon her drooping head. The wedding might be quiet enough, but Sir Wilfred would not suffer one jot of the bride's personal adornment to be abated; white satin, Brussels lace veil, orange blossoms and pearls had been

provided, as if a hundred guests would be there to see. Thus arrayed, the girl's beauty was almost startling in its excessive delicacy. There was not a touch of red in her cheeks or lips; her drooping eyelids seemed too heavy to be raised from the dark eyes; the veins showed upon her temples with painful distinctness. She yielded herself passively to all the changes made in her dress, but took no special notice of any one thing. The faint, vacant smile that hovered upon her lips added to the positive ghastliness of her beauty.

A knock came to the door. "Is Miss Vanborough ready?" Sir Wilfred was waiting to lead the bride downstairs.

"Mr. Jacobi is ready to start, ma'am," said Martin to Mrs. Danvers. "He told me to ask if you were ready, too."

"Tell him I will follow," said Mrs. Danvers. "He ought to be there first. I will come either with Miss Vanborough or on foot."

And with this answer Jacobi, though somewhat offended, had to be content.

Mrs. Danvers heard him drive away, saw Clarice go downstairs on her father's arm, then locked herself into her own room. Sir Wilfred and his daughter started ten minutes later, but she did not accompany them. She would be there almost as soon as they were, she had assured Sir Wilfred when he conducted Clarice from her room; but she had a few changes to make in her dress which would occupy her for a few minutes.

"I trust you will be there in time, Mrs. Danvers," said Sir Wilfred, rather anxiously. And Mrs. Danvers had assured him that she would. They would have to make a considerable round by the avenue and the road, but she could easily take the path through the park to the church, she said. But nobody saw her go.

Sir Wilfred had been anxious on the score of Clarice's weak health and excitability, but he was reassured by her perfect quietness on this occasion. Her white veil partially hid her face from him, but, although she hardly spoke in answer to his occasional questions, he felt that she was wonderfully tranquil, and was glad to think

that he had followed Jacobi's advice and hastened the marriage.

News of the wedding had got abroad. The village people were crowding round the church doors and filling the pews inside. But no friends of the family had chosen to attend the ceremony. The curate's wife had ensconced herself in a corner of the building to witness it, but even she meant to keep herself a little out of sight. Joan Darenth had come with her father; both gravely interested in the event. At the last moment some excitement was created by the arrival of Mrs. Tremaine with one of her daughters in a close carriage. She looked pale and agitated, and her appearance aroused great interest in the minds of the villagers, who had long discussed the likelihood of a marriage between Miss Clarice and Mr. Nigel.

The bridegroom, evidently nervous, but wearing the smile by which he always tried to mask anxiety or fear, had taken his place at the altar, with his best man—a young surgeon of the neighbourhood who had supplanted Doctor Ambrose at Charnwood Manor, and who bore a reputation of not being over scrupulous as to the ways and means of his advancement.

Last of all a veiled woman in black came in by the side-door, and took a seat near the centre aisle, half-way up the church.

Sir Wilfred's carriage drove up. Sir Wilfred was inclined to be fussy and anxious; he wanted to wait until Mrs. Danvers should arrive. But the gaping crowd at the churchyard gate induced him to hasten matters a little. The door was opened; he got out and held forth his hand to assist his daughter.

The church was situated on a knoll, and the pathway from the door to the gate was steep and irregularly flagged. It was necessary that the bride should first mount some steps to the churchyard gate, then make her way to the door on foot. Some matting had been laid over the uneven stones.

She had taken her father's arm and placed her foot upon the lowest step, when Sir Wilfred's attention—not hers—was arrested by the fact that the people's heads were turned another way, that a little crowd was collecting in another

direction, that a curious murmur of suspense and alarm seemed to be gathering in the air. Angered by what he considered to be a breach of decorum, a token of disrespect, he would have mounted the steps without any visible notice of the growing agitation beyond a slight quickening of his pace; but Clarice was too feeble to be hurried. A faint buzz of voices began to rise. Somebody in the distance called out—"Stop."

"Stop him!" he was almost certain that he heard the men and women around him saying—"Poor gentleman! he little knows——" "Don't let him go into the church." "Why not?"

Suddenly the little crowd divided. Before Sir Wilfred had passed through the churchyard gate a young man had dashed through the groups of spectators and thrown himself in the way of the bride and the bride's father.

"I am not too late," he said, with pale, set face and flashing blue eyes. "This ceremony must not go on. Sir Wilfred Vanborough, let me beg of you to take your daughter home at once. There is an insuperable obstacle to the marriage."

"Out of my path, young man," said Sir Wilfred, with stern dignity. "Your own disappointed hopes should not lead you to falsehood. If you bar our advance any longer I will have you removed by the police."

"Are you mad?" said Nigel Tremaine, vehemently. "I tell you that there is an obstacle. Jacobi has a wife living. I do not bar your advance. Take your daughter now to be married, if you will."

Sir Wilfred paused, shocked, irresolute. The rumour of the disturbance had by this time penetrated to the interior of the church. The clergyman came out hurriedly, followed by Jacobi and his friends. There was a moment's utter stillness.

Then arose another tumult, a hubbub louder than before. Through the crowd of pressing village-folk there came a strangely silent procession of men, who bore between them a motionless figure laid upon a stretcher like one dead. Nigel pointed to it with an expressive gesture; it seemed as if, for the moment, he could not speak. Sir

Wilfred turned, with Clarice on his arm, and then recoiled a few paces in horrified amaze.

For the senseless form and the pallid, death-like face before him were the face and form of Geoffrey Vanborough, his elder son.

CHAPTER XXIV

IN THE CHURCHYARD

"GOOD heavens, what is all this?" said Jacobi, fiercely. His face had turned as white as that of the enemy who lay before him; but his eyes gleamed with a sinister expression of malice and evil. He had not heard Nigel's accusation, but he saw that some interruption had already occurred, and knew that the appearance of Geoffrey, stricken down and senseless as he was, boded him no good.

The young surgeon went at once to Geoffrey Vanborough's side. In a few moments he looked up for some little assistance. Who was there to render it? Tremaine was speaking to Jacobi; Sir Wilfred was listening with averted head; the bride was like a lay-figure, moving only on impulses from without. The clergyman, Mrs. Tremaine and her daughter formed part of the group around the bride and bridegroom.

The surgeon glanced round anxiously. But there was one strong arm, one willing heart that he knew nothing of. Joan Darenth came steadily through the crowd, which made way for her with a murmur of relieved approbation, and knelt down by Geoffrey's side. Silently and carefully, but with an intent, grave face, which looked unusually pale, she attended to the surgeon's directions, as he tried, but tried in vain, to ascertain how he had been injured.

The woman in black had risen from her seat in the church, and stood with others in the churchyard. She was half-concealed by a tall tombstone, and perhaps the position was a good one if she did not wish to excite remark. Her black dress and closely-drawn crape veil made her sufficiently remarkable in the crowd of brightly-dressed spectators. Fanny Tremaine, who was imaginative, said afterwards that the woman in black would have passed

well for a grim figure of Destiny, standing in the background among the tombs.

Meanwhile, Nigel Tremaine had restrained his indignation sufficiently to utter a few short telling sentences to Constantine Jacobi in the presence of Clarice and her father.

"Your wife is still living. You abandoned her cruelly seven years ago, and your infant child as well; but she did not meet with her death, as you fondly hoped. She is alive and well at this very moment."

A yellow pallor overspread Jacobi's face. His livid lips quivered; his hands clenched themselves convulsively. But he recovered his self-possession with marvellous swiftness.

"Sir," he said, turning at once to the old baronet, and thus, by a master-stroke of cleverness, seeming to ignore Nigel himself as though his young accuser were beneath contempt, "you will at least do me the justice to believe that I speak the truth when I say that I saw my poor wife perish before my eyes in a shipwreck many years ago. How it can be affirmed that she is still living I do not know. But I am willing that every investigation should be made."

"Of course—of course," said Sir Wilfred, nervously, drawing his daughter's hand more closely within his arm. "We understand all that perfectly. I have every confidence in Mr. Jacobi."

"Every confidence in Mr. Jacobi!" repeated Nigel, in a tone of withering contempt. He was losing his self-control as Jacobi gained his, and, although he spoke low, because he was quite alive to the expediency of being heard by as few people as possible save those immediately concerned in the matter, his tones were growing eager, and almost fierce. "Does Mr. Jacobi not recognise me? Can you stand here and tell me to my face, you mean, lying hound, that you are not a murderer and a thief? Did you not try to rob me one night when I lay asleep in my tent on the Pampas; did you not do your best to kill me afterwards, and did you not kneel to Vanborough for mercy? Do you think I am likely to hear my friend speak of trusting you, and not do my very best to prove your villainy?"

"This is too much," cried Sir Wilfred.

"You are violent, Mr. Tremaine," said the clergyman, gravely. "The wedding will not proceed to-day, of course, but——"

"Mr. Jacobi will easily disprove these calumnies," said Sir Wilfred, haughtily.

He turned away as if to re-enter the carriage; his head was held erect, but it was easy to see that his hands were beginning to tremble violently.

Jacobi had turned a shade more livid than he had been before. It was with a ghastly attempt at a smile that he now responded, almost below his breath:

"I defy you to prove your statements. Did you ever see me face to face, ever speak to me in your life before?"

There was something in the form of the question which startled Nigel. Jacobi had laid his finger at once on the very weakest part of the case, now that Geoffrey could give no testimony. Never once had Nigel spoken to Jacobi, never seen him but for that one brief moment when the two men had grappled with each other in the darkness of the tent. It was impossible for him to say of his own knowledge that this man was the very Jacobi who had robbed and tried to murder him in South America. Geoffrey could do that, but Geoffrey lay senseless on the ground.

"Your son has all the proofs, sir," he said, addressing himself to Sir Wilfred. "When he is again conscious we shall be able to appeal to him."

"Appeal to Geoffrey Vanborough—against me?" said Jacobi, with a curl of the lips which he meant for a smile.

He could not forbear the taunt, although he trembled when he had uttered it, for Nigel looked at him as if he could willingly seize him by the throat and shake the life out of him as some wild creature of the woods will shake its prey. But his answer was given with the haughty calmness of utter disdain.

"Appeal to a gentleman and a man of honour," he said, "against a liar, a coward, and an escaped convict!"

Jacobi recoiled for an instant, then turned with a savage look and pointed to Geoffrey.

"What is he," he said, viciously, "but an escaped convict, too?"

Then he saw that he had gone too far. Sir Wilfred started—there was a little movement amongst some of the bystanders. Nigel's eyes flashed fire—in another second his hand had closed tightly on the man's collar.

"If we were alone," he said, "I would thrash you within an inch of your life for that last word. As there are ladies here I only warn you that you are not safe in my neighbourhood, and advise you to make off as soon as possible."

He forced him backwards as he spoke, down the steps and out into the road. The black figure behind the tombstone suddenly moved forward. It seemed almost as though she were going to interfere. But her interference was uncalled for. Sir Wilfred, who had relinquished Clarice for the present to the care of Mrs. Tremaine, and was looking with a gloomy countenance at the prostrate form of his son, turned back with a quick imperious gesture.

"Mr. Tremaine, this is my guest," he said, sternly. "You shall not assault him in the public road with impunity. Let go, sir! For shame! Where are the police?"

"The shame will be on your side, Sir Wilfred, if you allow that man to enter your house again," said Nigel impetuously. But he released Jacobi with an impatient turn of the hand which sent the would-be bridegroom headlong to the ground.

"I take command from no man," said Sir Wilfred. "This matter will be settled in good time. Jacobi."

He drew him aside, and conferred with him in lower tones. The crowd had gradually been dispersed by the efforts of Reuben Darenth and Mr. Hilton; the persons who remained were those chiefly interested in the course of events. Mr. Hilton had looked uneasily more than once at the woman in black, but she had been so motionless, so apparently unimpassioned an observer, that he did not like to interfere with her. And now the question of Geoffrey's state was raised, and an explanation offered by Nigel Tremaine.

It had been one of the unforeseen accidents of which nobody could give a very clear account. The two friends

had come from London that morning, and had arrived at Charnwood just in time to hear that this was Clarice's wedding-day. It seemed that Geoffrey, in his haste and alarm, had forgotten everything but the desire to reach his father's house immediately. He had rushed forward, crossed the line at a point where passengers were forbidden to pass, had slightly stumbled, and been knocked down by a coal truck and evidently severely injured. He had been insensible ever since; and the young surgeon's face was very serious and rather puzzled as he rose to answer the queries that were now addressed to him.

"I think he should be removed as soon as possible," he said, "and then I could tell more plainly what is amiss." He spoke to Sir Wilfred, who had finished his consultation with Jacobi, and listened courteously to what the young doctor had to say.

In that moment of suspended interest Nigel Tremaine turned to his mother and to Clarice. Mrs. Tremaine had put her arm round the girl's passive figure, and Clarice was leaning against her. In truth the whole scene had occupied but a very few moments, and yet Clarice's feeble strength seemed to have become exhausted. Mrs. Tremaine was looking very grave. She had not yet spoken to Nigel.

"Mother," he said to her, as he came up, and then he laid his hand gently upon her shoulder, but his eyes sought the face of Clarice. "How is she?"

"Don't startle her, Nigel." And then she let him raise the shrinking white face from her shoulder, fold back the rich folds of the disordered veil, and draw the little languid hands into his own.

"Clarice," he said, very gently. "Clarice, my darling, I have come back."

Mrs. Tremaine had been afraid that he would utter some word of anger or reproach, but he had schooled himself to resolute gentleness. Her very attitude had told him that she was physically unequal to contend with difficulties.

"Clarice," he said, "have you no word for me?"

He could see her face now. He saw its beautiful outlines and its absence of intelligence or emotion. Her large,

dark eyes, heavily shadowed by the purple-veined lids, met his in a full but vacant gaze. She did not speak.

His mother saw him turn pale, saw him bite his under lip and bend his brows in alarm and perplexity. She cried out, with tears in her eyes :

"Oh, Nigel, don't you see? Don't you understand how it is with her?"

He, still gazing incredulously into that pallid, soulless face, saw the white lips move uncertainly. His hands trembled with nervous eagerness. Was she going to speak to him at last?

She looked him full in the face and smiled. But there was no recognition—no meaning—in that smile. She even laughed—a soft, vacant, foolish little laugh; and then, in the midst of them all, with her brother lying senseless on the ground, with her bridegroom stealing away from her in fear and shame, with her old lover holding her by the hands and begging for one single sign of her continued love for him, she broke into the little humming song, without words, almost without tune, with which that very morning she had startled Mrs. Danvers.

Nigel dropped her hands with a groan of dismay.

"Good God!" he said, holding one hand before his eyes as though to shut out the sight, and staggering so that his mother almost feared that he would fall. "They have driven her mad between them!"

For a moment he seemed completely unnerved. He leaned against the churchyard wall, with his back to the group outside; they could see his hands twitch, his shoulders heave with one convulsive sigh or sob. But when he turned round again, his face, though colourless and shocked, was completely calm.

"I shall know whom to blame for this," he said quietly; but there was a look in his blue eyes which his mother did not like to see.

"Nigel," she said pitifully, "the dear child will recover. Now that you have come back she will be better."

He did not answer. He took Clarice into his arms and held her to him as his mother had been holding her. She laid her head against his shoulder as tranquilly as if it could not find a better resting-place.

But the interlude of quietness lasted but for a moment. His name was called sharply from behind. He started, kissed the girl on the forehead, then placed her once more in his mother's arms.

"Now," he said, "what is it? I am ready."

Sir Wilfred and Jacobi—who were hovering near—were both conscious of some change in his look and manner as he returned to them. The fire had died out from his eye, the impetuosity from his manner; there was an icy coldness and impenetrability about both which made Jacobi fear him more as an enemy than he had done in his former mood.

"We are talking about Mr. Vanborough's removal," said the surgeon, with an air of perplexity. "He ought to be taken somewhere at once."

"Of course. He will go to his father's house, I suppose," said Nigel, a little grimly.

"The inn is open to him," Sir Wilfred answered, stiffly. "Mr. Tremaine knows well enough that I have reasons for not admitting Captain Vanborough to my house."

"You refuse to take in your own son when he is in that state?" said Nigel, pointing to his friend's insensible form.

There was a moment's silence. Then Sir Wilfred replied, with added obstinacy:

"I refuse."

Before anyone could oppose this decision, or make another suggestion, a fresh person entered upon the scene. This was no other than Doctor Ambrose, to whom the news of the interrupted wedding had been brought while he was in the village, and who had immediately posted off to the church.

"What's all this?" he said, in his sharpest voice. "What are you all about in this treacherous Spring weather? Sir Wilfred, if you will allow me to advise you, I would get Miss Clarice home as soon as possible, if I were you. And as for Mr. Geoffrey—dear, dear, this looks bad."

He came to a sudden stop at Geoffrey's side. Joan, kneeling patiently with his head upon her lap, her hands touching the brown hair on either side of the handsome

head she loved so well, looked up at him with a world of entreaty in her magnificent dark eyes. It made the old doctor cough and choke a little before he spoke again. He knew Joan's secret well enough.

The young surgeon, to whom Jacobi had meanwhile been whispering, now stood forth in all the majesty of offended dignity.

"Sir," he said, "I believe that I am attending on Sir Wilfred Vanborough's family."

"Do you?" said Doctor Ambrose, bending his head over Geoffrey's prostrate form. "Well, if Sir Wilfred cares a button whether you or I attend his son Geoffrey I'll throw up the case. Otherwise, I mean to see him through it."

"The etiquette of the profession——" the young man began, a trifle pompously.

Doctor Ambrose cut him short.

"Oh, hang the etiquette of the profession! Did you bring Geoffrey Vanborough into the world, or did I? Sir Wilfred, do you mean to have your son nursed at home?"

"No," said Sir Wilfred, curtly. "Not while there is an inn in the village."

"Wretched place!" muttered the doctor. "No air, no light, no appliances." All this time he had been feeling Geoffrey's limbs and examining the pupils of his eyes. Then he looked at Joan.

"Miss Darenth, you are the best nurse in the place. Have you room for Captain Vanborough at the farm? He would be better there than at the inn."

A light flashed into Joan's face, but she did not accept the proposition unconditionally.

"My father is here, sir," she said. "If he consents, I shall be—quite willing."

Even at that moment the doctor smiled at the form of her answer.

"Where is Darenth?" he said.

"Here, sir." And Farmer Darenth's tall, grey figure came forward. "If there's anything we can do for Mr. Geoffrey," he said, "we shall be proud to do it. My house is open to anybody belonging to Sir Wilfred and his family."

Jacobi, although at some little distance, hazarded an observation to Sir Wilfred which he meant the rest of the company to overhear.

"In this case," he said, "perhaps Mr. Darenth does not understand that Captain Vanborough is not considered one of Sir Wilfred's family at present."

Tremaine turned round fiercely, but he had no need to speak. For once Sir Wilfred was not on Jacobi's side.

"Darenth is at liberty to do as he chooses," he said, coldly. "I merely refuse to admit Geoffrey Vanborough within my own doors; other people can do as they like."

He turned his back upon his son and walked to the carriage, where Clarice was already seated. "Where is Mrs. Danvers?" he said, looking round impatiently. "It is very extraordinary that she should not be here."

He bowed coldly to Mrs. Tremaine, seated himself by Clarice, and gave the signal to the coachman to drive home. Then he pulled down the blinds; the carriage moved slowly down the hill, and was soon lost to sight. Jacobi looked round at the party left behind with a slight sneering smile. He was still very pale, but there was an expression of insolent triumph upon his face which it was hard for Nigel to bear. For, at any rate, he had got Sir Wilfred to profess entire confidence in him; and he probably owed this expression of confidence to the bitterness and violence with which Tremaine had made his accusation, and which had certainly put him in the wrong in Sir Wilfred's eyes.

So when Nigel returned his glance with a steady look of silent contempt, Jacobi smiled still more, made a low bow to him and to the ladies, and then took the path to the village. They breathed more freely when he was fairly gone.

Mrs. Tremaine had been trying to induce Doctor Ambrose to send Geoffrey to Beechfield, but he objected on account of the distance. He was growing very angry at the delay which had already occurred, and hastened as much as possible the preparations for his transport to the farm. Mrs. Tremaine's carriage was at once placed at his disposal, and finally the cavalcade moved slowly on its way.

Nigel hesitated at first whether to go to the farm or

to proceed at once to Charnwood Manor and justify his behaviour to Sir Wilfred. He decided, however, to accompany the doctor, in order to ascertain the extent of Geoffrey's injuries, and whether there was any chance of his being able at present to give the testimony required as to Jacobi's identity.

Joan and her father went on first to make all necessary arrangements for the reception of the invalid. The carriage followed at rather a slow pace.

The churchyard was finally left almost empty. Mr. Hilton had taken Nigel by the arm, and talked to him in a low tone as they walked away together.

The villagers had dispersed. One person only was left, and that was the woman in black.

She waited until everybody had gone, then sank down upon one of the low, green mounds around her in an attitude of complete exhaustion and depression. Presently she put back her veil as if it stifled her, drew a long, deep breath, and muttered a few words to herself.

"So, after all, I need not have come," she murmured to herself. "They have managed the matter without me; not without my help, however—not without my letter to Geoffrey Vanborough. Poor Geoffrey! Poor Joan!"

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE PARK

THE agitation and excitement of the foregoing events had a prejudicial effect upon Sir Wilfred Vanborough's health. One morning, when old Martin came as usual into his master's room, he found Sir Wilfred almost unable to move or speak. He had had another stroke of paralysis in the night.

He recovered his speech and the use of his left hand and arm, but his right side was greatly affected. It became impossible for him to walk, and a wheeled chair conveyed him from room to room. The mixture of fretfulness and imperiousness which he displayed made him a trying

patient, and every one was pleased when the doctor supplied him with a trained male attendant, who waited upon him skilfully and patiently, and managed him like a child. Jacobi dared not be long absent from him, for Sir Wilfred could hardly bear him out of his sight, but he hated attendance on the sick man, and was heartily glad when some business affairs called for his presence in London, as Sir Wilfred's representative, and he could leave Charnwood behind him, if only for two or three days.

Clarice had not yet left her father's house. Sir Wilfred's illness had delayed her departure. She had been kept under strict watch and ward by Mrs. Danvers and Jacobi, and was never allowed to be out of sight of one or other of her guardians.

But in Jacobi's absence Mrs. Danvers relaxed her restrictions. She did not keep the girl entirely under her own eye, and more than once allowed her to wander about in the garden without visible escort. She herself was never far distant, but she did not believe that it was for Clarice's good to be constantly under surveillance. And, perhaps, she had another reason.

Be that as it may, it certainly happened that when looking out of the window one day her quick eye caught sight of something or somebody that made her smile.

"At last!" she said to herself, as she drew back from the window.

"Come, Clarice," she said, laying her hand on the girl's shoulder, "won't you come out into the garden? The fresh air will do you good."

Clarice made no answer. She was sitting in a corner of the sofa, her hands clasped idly before her, her head bent down. She submitted meekly while Mrs. Danvers, with gentle hand, dressed her in hat and cloak, and then led her out into the garden. Here Mrs. Danvers meant to leave her; but the girl did what she would sometimes do—she caught at Mrs. Danvers' arm and would not let her go. Some new tenderness in her companion's manner, some feeling of compassion that revealed itself in voice, or look, or touch, made Clarice now and then cling to her as a protector and friend.

"Stay with me," she said, nervously. "Stay with me."

She spoke very little now, but when she made a request of this kind Mrs. Danvers always granted it.

"Stay with you, my dear?" she said, softly. "Yes, if you like it, I will."

And then she added to herself with a smile, "Perhaps it is better that I should."

She took the girl's hand and drew it within her arm, then bent her steps slowly towards the park. They arrived at last at a little path which led from one side of the park to the other and was still preserved as a thoroughfare for various families in the neighbourhood who had the right of entrance. And here, at the gate which opened upon the road—the gate which Clarice had tried to find on the night of her flight from Charnwood Manor to the Hillside Farm—the young keeper was standing, talking to a gentleman in a grey suit. A curious little smile came again to Mrs. Danvers' lips as she saw him. "I thought I was not mistaken," she said to herself. "Now, will he avoid us, or will he not?"

She turned down to the gate as if she wanted to pass out. The keeper touched his hat and moved aside; the gentleman in grey turned round and met them face to face. It was Nigel Tremaine.

He knew Mrs. Danvers by report. She was one of Clarice's keepers. His eyes darkened as he glanced at her and raised his hat. She, at least, had no right to stand between him and his love. He wondered that she had chosen to brave him in this way. She could have taken another direction for her walk if she had liked.

"Clarice," he said, and he came forward to take her by the hand.

Mrs. Danvers hesitated, then stopped short.

"Have you any business with this young lady, sir?" she asked. Her voice was as hard as steel. "What right have you to address her?"

"Every right," said Nigel, boldly. "She is my promised wife."

"She is Mr. Jacobi's promised wife, I think," said Mrs. Danvers, coldly.

Was it curiosity that had led her to the place? She had caught a glimpse of Mr. Tremaine in the park from an upper window, and she had deliberately walked with Clarice to the spot where she should meet him. What was her object?

"Her father may have promised her to Jacobi; she never gave herself to him of her own free will. Clarice, my darling, do you not know me yet? Do you not remember?"

Clarice raised her eyes for the first time to his face; a puzzled, bewildered expression came into them. She dropped them again and turned towards Mrs. Danvers. "Take me home," she whispered, below her breath.

"You see, sir," said Mrs. Danvers, quietly, "she does not even know you. I do not know you either."

"My name is Nigel Tremaine," said the young man, facing her with equal quietness. "I have not a card about me, but I dare say that that fellow, the keeper, will bear witness to my identity. Shall I call him?"

"No, sir," said Mrs. Danvers, with impenetrable gravity and a slight bend of the head. "I am satisfied. I have heard your name before. Come, Clarice."

She turned back to the park, but Nigel was not to be baffled yet. He walked at Mrs. Danvers' side.

"Excuse me," he said, "if I seem importunate. There can be no harm in allowing me to speak to Miss Vanborough for a few minutes. Let me see if I can recall myself to her memory. I shall not detain you long."

"I think you know, Mr. Tremaine, that Sir Wilfred Vanborough especially desires any remembrance of you to be banished from her mind. We have done our best to efface it."

"And how you have succeeded!" said Nigel, with some stern bitterness. "You have effaced other remembrances besides the remembrance of myself. To efface that memory you have made her mind a blank. I am no physician; but it seems to me that if you want to restore her to health and strength you should give her back her old interests, her old memories, if possible—among them, give her back the memory of myself. That might help, I think, towards her recovery. But it also seems to me that she is sur-

rounded by persons who do not wish her to recover ; who are interested in keeping her as she is."

" I, at least, am not one of those persons, Mr. Tremaine," said Mrs. Danvers, gravely. " I will give you a proof of my wish for her welfare. I acknowledge the truth of your remarks. Make a trial of your experiment now. Here is a bench ; the air is warm ; it will not hurt her if we sit down. Take the place beside her ; so. Yes, you may take her hand if you like. Now make your experiment. See if you can recall yourself to her memory or not."

Nigel took the place thus designated in almost bewildered silence. He took Clarice's hand in his. There was a moment's pause. Mrs. Danvers did not sit down.

" I will leave you," she said, looking at the two in turn. " I shall walk up and down the path for a few moments. You are quite out of sight of the house ; nearly cut of sight of the pathway too. Is the keeper your friend ? "

" I think so ; I am not sure."

" I will speak to him myself. I give you ten minutes. Make the most of it. No, don't thank me. I have my own reasons—my own purposes to serve."

She said the last words in a dreamy, absent way, as if she addressed herself rather than them.

Mrs. Danvers left him, and paced up and down the quiet, moss-grown pathway for some minutes. No one came ; the place was as silent as a desert. At last she looked at her watch, went back to the garden seat, and stood before the couple seated there.

Nigel's arm was round Clarice ; one of her hands was clasped in his ; she was leaning against his shoulder. She was gazing before her, her lips parted, her dark eyes puzzled, but quieter and more contented than usual. Her face preserved its snowy whiteness, but it had gained in force of expression. There was something behind its colourless beauty now—some thought, some emotion, confused and tremulous it might be, but genuine of its kind—the face was not merely a waxen, lifeless mask.

" So soon ? " Nigel murmured, with a look of entreaty.

" I have given you a quarter-of-an-hour. You must leave her now."

Nigel moved a little, bent down and kissed the girl's forehead. She gave him a timid, startled glance, but did not seem displeased; her hand lay passively in his.

Mrs. Danvers spoke to her. "Who is this, Clarice?" she said, touching Tremaine on the arm.

"Nigel," she said, softly.

A gleam of triumph shone in Nigel's eyes. She knew him now.

"Who is Nigel?" Mrs. Danvers proceeded.

Clarice was silent. Her eyes wandered. "I don't know," she said, pitifully. The young man's brow contracted. He thought that Mrs. Danvers had asked an impudent question. But the girl's eyes had reverted to his face, and a quieter expression stole into them.

"He is very kind," she said, with a little tone of pleasure. "He loves me."

"Yes, my darling, with all my heart and soul." Then he turned to Mrs. Danvers. "Is not that enough? Has the experiment not succeeded?"

It seemed to him that Mrs. Danvers sighed. "Perhaps too well," she said, "Come, Clarice, we must go into the house."

But when Nigel made a movement as if to leave her, the fragile fingers closed on his with a firmer grasp than they had seemed capable of.

"Don't leave me," Clarice said—the weakened voice uplifting itself in humble entreaty, like that of a frightened child. "Don't go away. Come with us, too."

"He cannot come with us just now, my darling," said Mrs. Danvers, tenderly trying to withdraw the slender little hand from Nigel's large grasp. "He will come to you again. Let him go."

Suddenly she cast her arms round him and buried her face on his breast. "I will go with you," she said. "Nigel, take me away with you."

This time it was he who freed himself from her grasp. His face burnt hotly for a moment, then turned very pale. He did not speak, as he put her into Mrs. Danvers' arms. But she looked back at him, and then at Mrs. Danvers, with scared, pathetic eyes. "Why does he put me away from him?" she said. "Doesn't he love me any longer?"

And then the large tears filled her eyes, and fell one by one over her pale cheeks.

"My darling," Nigel was beginning, but Mrs. Danvers stopped him peremptorily.

"No more," she said. "This is too much for her. I must take her to the house. Wait here for a few moments; I will send you a message. You can read Spanish?"

Nigel answered in the affirmative, his eyes still fixed upon Clarice's pale, bewildered face.

"Be kind to her, for God's sake!" he said, in low, passionate tones, as he drew aside to let them pass.

Mrs. Danvers made no answer. She put her arm round the trembling girl, and spoke soothingly as they went upon their way. Nigel watched them till they were out of sight, then sat down upon the bench, and rested his face upon his hands. His self-command was sorely tried by Clarice's helpless looks and words. A flood of tenderness and pity had filled his heart when he looked into her saddened face, her vacant eyes, and threatened at times to overthrow the calmness which he knew he ought especially to maintain in her presence.

By-and-by he heard footsteps on the gravel. Looking up, he was greeted by a broad smile and a curtsy from Betsy Blane.

"Missis sends you this," she said. "And you're to go away, you know. It won't do for you to be hanging about here. Master don't like it."

She shook her head at him with a look of amicable reprehension, and held out to him a piece of paper twisted up into the shape of a tiny note. Nigel rewarded her with half-a-crown, and read the words that he found inside the paper. They were written in Spanish, but translated ran as follows:

"If you will meet me at the spot where we parted this afternoon, at eight o'clock in the evening, it may be for your advantage and for hers."

There was no signature.

"Any answer?" said Betsy, who was regarding him with much curiosity.

"Say 'Very well' to Mrs. Danvers. Do you understand, my good girl?"

Betsy nodded. And before Nigel could add another word she had turned her back upon him and was trotting towards the house again.

Eight o'clock brought Nigel to the appointed place. The night was fine and still, but dark. He had to wait some little time before he heard a footfall on the gravel and saw a dark figure at his side.

Mrs. Danvers spoke first.

"Is it you?" she said.

"It is I—Nigel Tremaine. You are Mrs. Danvers, Miss Vanborough's——"

"Miss Vanborough's companion. Yes," There was a short pause, broken at last by Mrs. Danvers. "What have you to say to me, Mr. Tremaine?"

"What have I to say?" said Nigel, in some surprise. "I thought that you wished to speak to me."

"Perhaps I do. But I fancied that you might like to make your statement first. You were engaged to Clarice before you went abroad, I think?"

"I was."

"You expected her to be true to you? She has not a very strong nature."

"It is a fine and sweet nature. Few girls could have withstood the system of persecution to which she seems to have been exposed."

"You are angry," said Mrs. Danvers. "I do not wonder at it. You are angry with me?"

"I have no reason for dissociating you from any of the other conspirators," said Nigel, coldly.

"Now, you are unwise," said his companion, as they walked a few steps side by side down the garden path; "unwise because unjust. It was I who stopped the marriage."

"You?"

"Did you not receive in South America an anonymous letter, giving you information respecting Constantine Jacobi?"

"Well—and if we did?"

"I wrote that letter," said Mrs. Danvers, with imperturbable calm.

"You!" And then Nigel was absolutely silent for a

moment. "How did you know? Why should you write?"

"I wrote," said Mrs. Danvers, "because I thought it was time her brother or her lover should come home to save her from the wiles of a bad, unscrupulous man. I would not have written quite as I did, however, if I had known all that I know now about Geoffrey Vanborough."

"What do you know?"

"I know that Sir Wilfred is so bitter against him that he threatens to send certain documents which he possesses—proofs of the forgery, I conclude—to the proper authorities, and allow him to be prosecuted if they take up the matter. At all events, the facts would be blazoned far and wide in a very unpleasant manner. And with Jacobi at his ear, if Geoffrey should recover, I am sure he would do it. He keeps silence now only because Geoffrey is on a sick bed. It is the one bit of tenderness he has shown. But, if we proceed carefully, I think we may be able to hinder that."

"Then you are on our side, after all!"

"Yes."

"You pity my poor Clarice? Why did you not stop the wedding before, knowing all that you knew?"

"Would they have believed me? I should have been turned out of the house and done no good. No, I preferred another person to do that piece of work. I have other interests besides yours and Clarice's to look after."

This speech sounded so cold, so almost cruel, that Nigel was struck dumb with perplexity.

"Shall I explain myself to you," she went on, "if I say that I have Joan Darenth's interests at heart besides yours?"

"Joan Darenth's! What do you know about Joan Darenth?"

"Have you no reason in your own mind for connecting Joan Darenth with the Vanborough family? If you have not, I will not ask you to think further of what I have said."

"But I have," said Nigel, with some energy; "I have."

"Then—I am acting now for Joan's happiness, as well as for the welfare of Geoffrey Vanborough, of Clarice, and of yourself. Do you approve of that?"

"Perfectly." Then, after a short silence, "You seem to know everything."

"I think I do. But now, to business. Do you know what they are going to do with Clarice?"

"What?"

"They are going to take her to London next week, and give her into the keeping of her brother and his wife. I have seen little of Mrs. Gilbert Vanborough, but I understand that she is devoted to her husband. And her husband is Jacobi's tool."

"Gilbert, Jacobi's tool? That is worse than I bargained for."

"At Charnwood." Mrs. Danvers proceeded, steadily, "she is kept in seclusion. She does not see Jacobi; and, therefore, I notice that she steadily improves. But in London, Jacobi proposes to visit her twice or three times a week."

"The villain!"

"Gilbert will have no power to prevent it. He dare not refuse. Imagine for yourself what will follow. We cannot make Clarice understand that it is impossible for him to marry her; we cannot guard her from the influence of the paralysing terror which assails her when he is near. They have threatened her with a madhouse already; she will be in one in three months' time if she goes to Gilbert Vanborough's house—or in her grave."

They had stopped short. Nigel drew his breath hard. He did not speak.

"Can you devise no remedy?" said his companion.

"None."

"Then listen to mine. I shall take Clarice to London on a certain day. They will expect us at Chelsea; well, do you see what follows?"

"No."

"We shall never arrive there."

"What?"

"You are slow," said Mrs. Danvers. "You will have taken rooms for us beforehand in some quiet, out-of-the-way corner of London. We shall go there and hide ourselves. And then—I have known men who would hardly wait for a further suggestion."

"If Clarice were in her usual state of mind and body I should not hesitate," Nigel said, in a grave tone. "Nothing would induce me to steal a march upon her and marry her in her present state. It would not be fair to her."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Danvers, with some wonder, "I once knew a man who would have behaved like that. He was a good man—a kind man. You must be good and kind, too."

"Mrs. Danvers," said Nigel, "you would set my mind very much at rest if you would tell me your motive for acting in this way."

"It is incomprehensible, is it not?" she said.

CHAPTER XXVI

GOING TO LONDON

"I OFFER you the chance of helping to save her," said Mrs. Danvers, as Nigel did not speak, "because I think it would be hard on you if she were to disappear and make no sign. Otherwise, I had resolved upon managing the matter myself and trusting no one. But, I believe that, even if you disapprove of my scheme, you would not care to take her out of kindly hands and place her in Jacobi's power again. I am sorry that you hesitate."

"I may as well speak the truth," said Nigel, frankly. "You speak with great kindness, Mrs. Danvers. But, you ask me to consent to place the most precious thing in the world to me in your hands unconditionally, and I have never seen you in my life before to-day. Pardon me, if I seem rude; I have no intention of being so."

"You need not apologise; I like you to be careful. Will this satisfy you? You may make arrangements yourself, if you choose. Find the rooms we are to occupy; let them belong to people you know, if you like it better; only be sure that our secret is kept. Take any precautions you like. But I am not playing you false. I am as anxious for Clarice's safety as you are."

"Clarice will not be of age for nine months," said Nigel, thoughtfully. "Of course you are aware that we are planning what is neither more nor less than an abduction? A punishable offence by the law of England?"

"Does that deter you?"

"Deter me?—no. But there is another way of escape open to her. Jacobi's wife may appear upon the scene."

"Do you know where she is?" said Mrs. Danvers, in a very quiet tone.

"No, indeed, or I would have her here to-morrow. If delay were possible she might be found in the meantime."

"Mr. Tremaine," said his companion, with a sudden change of voice, "we have been here for some time, and you have as yet given me no answer to my proposal about Clarice. I must have one to-night, or I shall resort to other means."

"I consent gladly," he said. "She must be saved, at all risks."

Mrs. Danvers did not comment upon his answer. She proceeded calmly, as if she had thought over the matter many times. "We shall probably leave Charnwood on Tuesday next. This is Thursday. I can easily oppose Jacobi's accompanying us, on the ground of his causing her too much excitement; and I will provide against our being met at King's Cross by Mr. or Mrs. Gilbert Vanborough. And now our interview must come to an end. You had better go to London to-morrow and look for rooms. I have five minutes more in which to tell you the rest of my plan."

They separated at length; he proceeded to Beechfield and she returned to the house.

Jacobi re-appeared next morning and told her that he had seen Gilbert, and that Clarice must be got ready to go to Chelsea early in the following week.

"I suppose you will have to go with her," he said, carelessly.

"There is no need for you to go with us," she answered, with careful deliberateness. "You know how your presence agitates the girl."

"Perhaps you are right," he said. "But, at any rate,

I could go up to London when the sale is over, and meet you at Gilbert's house."

"I would not be in too great a hurry," Mrs. Danvers responded. "She is very much out of health. Let her have a day or two in which to rest."

She rose to go as she spoke. No sign of agitation was visible in her face or in her gait; but her white hands trembled. Jacobi saw the movement of her fingers, and asked himself angrily what Antonia was up to now.

He watched her very closely during the following days, but saw nothing to increase his suddenly-formed suspicion of her.

"You are sure your wife is dead?" she said to him once, with some earnestness.

"Oh, yes. Quite sure. Why?"

"If she were not dead, do you think that even I could allow you to delude them in this way? I should prefer not to see Clarice trapped into a pretended marriage."

"You grow romantic, my dear," laughed Jacobi, in his airiest way.

"Where did you see your wife die?" said Mrs. Danvers, who had a way of going on with her own train of thought and resuming it when she thought expedient, which always enraged Jacobi. He uttered an oath as he turned from her.

"I saw her drowned before my eyes in the middle of a storm at sea," he said, savagely. "Is that not enough for you? I saw her go down, heard her call to me to save her; saw the waves close over her head. Ugh! It was an ugly sight, too!"

"Did you try to save her?" she asked, with curious intensity. "Did you swim after her—encourage her—hold her up with your hands—fasten her baby upon your shoulders, and swim with it to shore? Did you——"

She stopped short suddenly. Jacobi was looking at her with a strange mixture of guilty fear and dark suspicion.

"*Dios!* Antonia, who told you this?" he said, below his breath, in Spanish.

"I do not understand you," she said, dropping her eyes. "Is it Spanish or Portuguese you are talking? I was only imagining what you might have done."

She rose and left the room. Jacobi did not try to detain her; he only followed her with his dark and sullen gaze.

On Monday, Mrs. Danvers wrote a polite little note to Mrs. Gilbert Vanborough, stating that Clarice was so unwell that she could not travel on Tuesday, but that if she were better she should come on Wednesday, or Thursday at the latest.

Betsy Blane posted the letter to Mrs. Gilbert Vanborough in the village on Monday evening, just before the seven o'clock post went out.

The question had been mooted whether or not Clarice should take a maid with her. Mrs. Danvers had decided—after consultation with Jacobi, of course—in the negative. They could procure a maid in London. There was no one in Charnwood Manor who could fill such a position in London household. They certainly could not take Betsy Blane.

But Betsy Blane had been so useful that Mrs. Danvers felt that she must not go without making her a present. On the Saturday before the departure from Charnwood, therefore, Mrs. Danvers graciously accompanied the girl to the neighbouring town, and took her to a draper's shop. Here, to Betsy's solemn and awe-struck delight, she purchased several yards of plain brown merino, and other materials necessary for the making of a dress, two warm overcoats of a sober grey colour—"one for Betsy, and one for an old woman in the village"—as Mrs. Danvers casually remarked, and two plain black straw hats with ribbons with which to trim them, as well as several smaller articles of clothing. Then she went to another shop and bought a plain black bag; a bag of a kind unrecognisable from hundreds of other black bags, but a useful and capacious article of its kind. And then she brought Betsy Blane back to Charnwood in a much exalted frame of mind.

One grey coat, one black hat and ribbons, material for one brown merino dress, all fell to Betsy's share. But no old woman in the village was benefited by the second grey coat, or by the black hat. The coat went into the black bag; and Mrs. Danvers employed her leisure time

for the remainder of the day in openly trimming the straw hat with two rather staring red roses, for Clarice. "It will do for her to travel in," she said complacently, in Jacobi's presence. And then she added some white lace, twirled it round upon her fingers like a milliner to the manner born, and looked very content with her handiwork.

There was another piece of work about which she did not take Jacobi into her confidence. She sat up nearly all that night, occupied in the making of a plain brown merino skirt. When that was completed she folded it up neatly, and placed it also in the black bag.

They were to start by a train which left Charnwood at two-fifteen. They would change at a junction a few miles off, get into a train on the Great Northern line of railway, and reach King's Cross at four-fifteen.

"Do you think Mr. Vanborough will meet us?" said Mrs. Danvers.

"Hardly. You can have Martin to go with you if you like."

"Oh, no, thank you. I ought to be able to take care of a girl and two or three boxes at my age, I think," said she, with a somewhat acid smile.

"I shall not see you for a day or two, then," Jacobi went on. It was ten o'clock on Tuesday, the twentieth of February—for more than a fortnight had passed since the day of the interrupted wedding—and Jacobi was preparing to start upon a business expedition which Sir Wilfred had requested him to undertake. But he had an uneasy feeling that he would have liked very much to accompany the travellers as far as Gilbert's house.

"Would you see Clarice before you start?" said Mrs. Danvers, in an amicable tone. On his assenting, she took him to Clarice's room, where the girl was sitting in an easy chair.

Jacobi stood and looked at her for a moment, as if making an inventory of the details of her appearance. She wore a warm, soft dress of deep red cashmere and velvet, and beside her, upon a chair, lay the sealskin jacket and black hat trimmed with red roses in which she was to travel,

and a pair of fur-lined gloves. Mrs. Danvers was dressed very plainly in black; he did not cast more than a passing glance at her attire.

"Good-bye, Clarice," he said, taking her reluctant hand in his. "I hope you will give me a warmer greeting when I see you again in London."

He released her trembling fingers, and looked at her with a frown upon his handsome, evil face.

"Hasn't she learnt her lesson yet?" he said, with a dark look at Mrs. Danvers. "I hope you will succeed better at Chelsea than you have done here."

He quitted the room, and, in a few minutes, Mrs. Danvers heard the front door open and shut. She drew a long breath of relief as she came back to Clarice's room to complete her packing arrangements.

Mrs. Danvers carried the black bag in her hand when she went down to the carriage.

Clarice was taken upstairs to bid her father good-bye. It seemed to some of the servants—afterwards—that she had been exhibited more than usual. Scarcely one of them but could have described her appearance and dress in detail, for she was kept waiting for a minute or two on a chair in the hall, while Mrs. Danvers went upstairs for a cloak. Mrs. Danvers herself was a little less quiet in manner than usual.

A minute before the train started Joan Darenth presented herself at the carriage window.

"Let me see her before she goes," she cried, breathlessly. "Let me kiss her once more—my darling! You will take care of her; you will bring her safe back to us, will you not?"

Mrs. Danvers had drawn back a little and lowered her veil as these words were spoken. Her eyes were fixed earnestly upon Joan. The girl was thinner, paler, by far, than she used to be; her beautiful eyes had a darker shadow under them—her lips drooped a little at the corners, as if from some secret source of anxiety and care. For Geoffrey still lay unconscious at the Hillside Farm; and doctors came and went, and averred that this long insensibility was very curious, and the case a very interesting and unusual one, but did nothing to arouse him from

his stupor. Perhaps it was Joan's long days and nights of watching that made her face so pale.

"Good-bye, my darling," she was saying; and she had neither eyes nor ears for anyone but Clarice, and the tears were standing upon her cheeks as she kissed her. "Good-bye! God bless you, and bring you back to us safe and well once more."

These were her last words. The train began to move, and Mrs. Danvers put back her veil and wondered to herself how much Joan knew.

CHAPTER XXVII

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

CONSTANTINE JACOBI stood on the doorstep of Gilbert's house in Cheyne Walk. He was dressed with remarkable care and precision; he had a flower in his button-hole, and a little polished cane in his hand. There was something about him almost jauntily self-satisfied and self-possessed. The door was quickly opened. He asked for Mrs. Vanborough, and was shown into the drawing-room. Merle came out from the studio and closed the door behind her.

She bowed when she saw him, but offered no more friendly greeting. Her fair face was rather cold and proud; she disliked Constantine Jacobi, and did not greatly care to hide her dislike.

"I shall bring you to your knees to me some day, young lady," was Jacobi's inward thought as he made his own graceful, supple obeisance, with almost an exaggerated show of respect.

"I will not detain you long," he said. "I merely wish to take the liberty of inquiring after Miss Vanborough's health."

"Miss Vanborough's health?"

Merle looked as if she thought she had not heard him aright.

"Curse her insolence!" Jacobi said to himself, but

he proceeded in his most gracious and conciliatory style.

"Pardon me if I intrude. I feared that Clarice—Miss Vanborough—might be fatigued with her journey, and I therefore called to inquire."

He seemed about to take his departure. Merle flushed crimson as she answered him.

"But I do not understand you. Where is Clarice?"

Jacobi, who had turned to the door, wheeled round now with a keen, suspicious glance.

"She is here, of course," he said.

"Indeed, she is not," said Merle, seriously. "She has not been inside the house."

The livid change that came over Jacobi's face surprised and almost shocked her. He looked so fierce, so wild, that it was with difficulty that she continued:

"We heard from Mrs. Danvers that she was too ill to come on Tuesday. We expected her to-day."

Then, as Jacobi still looked white with rage, or fear, or dismay, she asked:

"Why? Has there been some mistake? Has she——?"

"She left Charnwood on Tuesday," said Jacobi, between his teeth. And then he looked Merle threateningly in the face.

"You are not hiding her? You are sure she has not been in the house? You do not know where she is?"

"I will ask my husband to speak to you, Mr. Jacobi," said Merle, with a world of dignity in her gentle tones and fair face. It was the only answer she gave him. She entered the studio, where she found Gilbert in a waiting attitude.

"What does he want now?" he asked, hoarsely, seeing that his wife's face had grown pale.

She told him hurriedly what had occurred, and soon saw that his anxiety equalled, if it did not surpass, that of Jacobi. He seemed completely overcome by the news, and showed a reluctance to encounter Clarice's baffled suitor which Merle found surprising. However, in time, he consented to face Constantine Jacobi; but he insisted on doing so alone, and carefully drew the curtain across

the door as soon as he had closed it. He did not wish a word of the conversation that he expected would follow to be heard by Merle.

His expectations were realised to the full. Jacobi set no bounds to the manifestation of his anger. Possibly he had motives of policy in letting loose its full tide on Gilbert Vanborough. He raved, he stamped, he swore vengeance, he all but foamed at the mouth in impotent fury. If Gilbert had known anything of Clarice's whereabouts, he would certainly have been confused, or forced into some admission of his knowledge. He spoke of Scotland Yard; but Jacobi hesitated about putting the police in possession of any facts which might lead them to make inquiries respecting himself. He said, therefore, that he thought a search might be instituted without the aid of a detective.

He went down to Charnwood almost immediately, and informed Sir Wilfred of Clarice's disappearance. The old man, in his grief and anger, cried out, with scarcely a pause for reflection :

"She has gone to Nigel Tremaine."

Jacobi had arrived at the same conclusion. His own violence of manner disappeared when he left Gilbert's house. What could this disappearance mean? How had Antonia Danvers been gained over to Clarice's side? She must have had some motive of self-interest in abandoning him and his fortunes in this way. And probably Nigel Tremaine had supplied that motive.

He left Sir Wilfred to the care of his attendant, and summoned old Martin to the library. Martin could tell him nothing. One by one the other servants were examined, but they also knew nothing. Last of all came Betsy Blane, and as soon as he saw her Jacobi knew that she was implicated in the affair.

With a few adroit questions, Jacobi learnt the history of her taking a paper that Mrs. Danvers had given her, across the park to Nigel Tremaine, and he was soon convinced that Clarice and Mrs. Danvers had both spoken to Nigel a short time before the message was conveyed. It was quite enough evidence, to his mind, to prove that collusion had existed between Mrs. Danvers and Tremaine.

And the conviction of Mrs. Danvers' treachery was a shock to him from which he found it hard to recover.

His next step was to obtain from the servants a description of the dress in which Clarice and Mrs. Danvers had last appeared.

Jacobi went back to London, pausing awhile on his way at the Junction to make inquiries. The station-master remembered the ladies who had asked for a carriage for themselves very well. It was on Tuesday afternoon, and this was Thursday. Yes, he remembered the lady with the yellow curls on the forehead, and the invalid young lady, too. Was sure that they went on to London. They had a lot of luggage with them. He advised Jacobi to ascertain what had become of that luggage at King's Cross. Jacobi found the boxes belonging to Miss Vanborough and Mrs. Danvers at the Lost Property Office. He thought it advisable to leave them there for the present, with a man on the watch to see whether they were claimed or not. And then he fell to examining porters and officials on his own account, and he saw the guard of the train in which Mrs. Danvers and Clarice had travelled on the afternoon in question, but he gained no information at all.

He was still standing in the station, having excited some curiosity, some wrath, and some sympathy by his questions, when a boy came up and touched him on the arm.

"I see two ladies, a oldish one and a young 'un, o' Tuesday afternoon, between four and five," he said. "They come asking me the way to the Metropolitan, and wouldn't let me carry their bag. I remember 'em."

Jacobi turned eagerly.

"What were they like? Had the lady light hair that curled on her forehead?"

"If she had," said the boy, dubiously, "I didn't see it."

"She wore spectacles?"

"No, she didn't."

Of that the lad was sure.

"You did not notice what the young lady wore? Had she a fur jacket, for instance?"

"The girl looked like a servant, if it was the one I mean," he said. The boy winked knowingly. "And

this 'ere handkercher was what she dropped, a-going into the other railway station. See here ! ”

He drew from his pocket a white handkerchief with an embroidered crest and initials in one corner. The crest was the Vanborough crest ; the initials were C. D. V.

“ What'll you give me if I tell you ? ”

Jacobi held up half-a-crown.

“ Make it five shillings,” said the lad, “ and I'll tell you, and give you the hanky into the bargain.”

Jacobi gave him the five shillings and received the handkerchief in return.

“ Bishopsgate Street,” said the boy, as he pocketed the money. “ I was behind 'em with another person's luggage. I'd swear to it if necessary. Bishopsgate it was ; third class. Do anything more for you, sir ? ”

“ Your name and address,” said Jacobi, and, having written them down in his pocket-book, he made his way to the Metropolitan Station. Here, of course, he met with no success. Jacobi retired baffled, both at King's Cross and Bishopsgate Street, and returned to Chelsea to consult in a more friendly spirit with Gilbert.

Jacobi and Gilbert took counsel with one another, and decided upon placing the matter in the hands of a detective. The officer whom they employed was a civil, melancholy-looking man named Gale ; clever enough, perhaps, but by no means gifted with supernatural sagacity.

The “ mysterious disappearance of a young lady ” soon got into the papers and began to be talked about ; but the utmost publicity in this case seemed to produce no result at all.

The following advertisement was speedily seen in all the leading newspapers of the day :—

“ Two Hundred Pounds Reward.—Missing, a young lady, aged twenty ; five feet four inches in height, pale complexion, dark eyes and hair, delicate in appearance and health. Left X—— Junction for King's Cross on Tuesday, the 20th inst. ; was traced to Bishopsgate Street Station ; has not since been heard of. Wore on leaving home a red dress trimmed with velvet, sealskin jacket, black hat with red roses, fur-lined gloves, buttoned boots, linen marked C. D. V. ; supposed to be in company with

a lady about forty, dressed in black, with light hair curling on the forehead, pale complexion, and wearing spectacles. The above reward will be paid to any person or persons who may give such information as will lead to the discovery of the young lady now missing."

The address of an eminent firm of solicitors was added below.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE ESCAPE

AT X—— Junction ten minutes had to be passed. Mrs. Danvers interviewed the porters and the guard in turn, and secured a first-class carriage for Clarice and herself by well-timed gratuities to these officials.

The train went through to King's Cross without stopping. The journey would occupy rather more than fifty minutes. Mrs. Danvers established her charge in a corner of the railway carriage, and smiled as the train moved off.

They passed out of the station; away from the town, across a stretch of flat and undulating country. Mrs. Danvers rose up and pulled the blue curtains across the windows, then took down the black bag from the netting above her head and opened it.

"Clarice, my darling," she said, "I want to make a little alteration in your hat. Let me take it off."

Clarice allowed her to remove her headgear, then leaned back and closed her eyes. Had she opened them she would have seen Mrs. Danvers take a pair of scissors from her bag, and begin to cut the threads with which the scarlet flowers and the Spanish lace were sewn—lightly sewn indeed, judging from the ease with which they were unfastened. Then Mrs. Danvers took out a black ribbon and fastened it round the hat. Thus disembarrassed of the lace and flowers which had been piled upon it, the hat was a simple one enough which might have been worn by a respectable girl of the lower middle-class. When this transformation was effected, Mrs. Danvers heaped the lace and flowers into her bag.

Then she spoke to Clarice again.

"I am going to alter your dress a little, dear. Let me take off your jacket."

Clarice's eyes began to assume a bewildered expression, but her limbs were perfectly passive. Without a word, she allowed herself to be divested of her sealskin. Then Mrs. Danvers slipped over her head the plain brown skirt that she had recently been making, and fastened it round her waist. It had been made long enough to conceal every vestige of the red cashmere dress. Mrs. Danvers proceeded to endue her with the thick, grey coat that she had lately bought "for the old woman in the village." Then she replaced her furred gloves by black woollen ones, and looked at her critically. Nothing remained of Clarice Vanborough, in appearance, but the white face and melancholy dark eyes, which were too striking when once noticed to be easily forgotten. Mrs. Danvers fastened the black gauze veil upon the hat, but did not, as yet, draw it down over the girl's face; then she smiled a little to herself.

"Who could tell her for Miss Vanborough, now?" she said. "She looks like a village girl coming up to London for the first time in her life. She is not half fine enough for a lady's maid."

Into the capacious black bag went the sealskin jacket, the furred gloves, and then Mrs. Danvers proceeded to make an alteration in her own toilette—an alteration of a somewhat startling character.

She took off her bonnet and laid it on the seat beside her. Then she took off her spectacles and put them away. Next she manipulated her hair a little. The golden plaits came off very easily; then the waving fringe which had descended almost to her eyebrows. Thus denuded, it might have been seen that Mrs. Danvers had beneath her plaits and her frizzles a beautiful head of hair of her own, straight and smooth as satin, and black as a raven's wing.

She showed the false hair to Clarice with a smile, but said nothing as she placed it in her bag. Then she took out a handkerchief and a little bottle, and rubbed her face, sometimes energetically, sometimes delicately, for a minute or

two. The handkerchief brought away a good deal of colour, and left her face much whiter than it had been before.

Two more changes had to be made. Mrs. Danvers changed her boots. Those that she placed in her bag were curiously unlike. The left foot had a much thicker sole and higher heel than the right one. If Betsy Blane had seen them she might—if she had been clever enough—have found a reason for the fact which had often perplexed her, the fact that Mrs. Danvers never sent her boots downstairs to be blacked. She had a fluid preparation which she used herself, Mrs. Danvers used to say, and that she liked much better than ordinary blacking.

Then she exchanged her cloak for the dark waterproof which she had previously given Clarice to wear. And, thus equipped, it could be easily seen that Mrs. Danvers was neither lame nor deformed, that she was a dark woman, with a pale and steadfast face, and that her dark eyes had no need of spectacles at all. Mrs. Danvers was transformed.

Clarice looked up and gave a start of terror. Mrs. Danvers came and sat beside her.

“Don't be afraid,” she said in her ear. “I am the same as ever. You love me a little, don't you?”

Clarice held out her hands to her. Her lips moved, but Mrs. Danvers could not catch her reply. She kissed the girl's pale cheek, and noticed with satisfaction that the look of terror was disappearing from her eyes; then returned to the task of concealing in her bag the garments she had doffed.

Finally, she wrapped a black scarf round her shoulders and drew down her veil; then took her place once more at Clarice's side, held the girl's hand in a firm but kindly clasp, and waited, erect and motionless, for the slackening of the train's pace.

Finsbury Park was past; York Road, King's Cross came next. Porters were seen running along the platform—one or two looked in at the carriage-window, from which Mrs. Danvers had pulled back the curtain. Her own veil was down, Clarice's also, and they were both sitting at the corner furthest from the door.

Mrs. Danvers rose, concealing Clarice from view, and took the bag from the seat.

"No luggage," she said to the porter in firm tones. "No, we don't want a cab. I can carry my bag myself."

The porter retired; the train stopped; the guard came up and unlocked the door,

"Your luggage is in the furthest van, ma'am," he said to Mrs. Danvers, confidentially. He did not notice any change in her appearance, and he could not see the young lady who was with her. The day had been cloudy, and was already drawing to a close. The lamps had not yet been lighted, and the carriage was nearly dark.

Mrs. Danvers gave him a shilling and thanked him. He walked onwards down the platform and as soon as he was gone Mrs. Danvers turned round and took Clarice by the hand.

"Now, my dear," she said, "come."

The two figures, veiled and muffled, passed through a jostling crowd of passengers and porters without a remark. Mrs. Danvers did not pause until she was out of the station; then she waited for a moment and looked round.

"Carry your bag for you, mum?"

A boy stood near her with a truck, on which various bags and boxes had already been deposited. He was going to wheel them down the road to the Metropolitan Station.

"No, thank you. Is this the way to the Underground Railway?"

"Right you are, mum. I'm going there. Walk alongside of me and you'll see where I go. Carry your bag for you, if you like."

Mrs. Danvers refused the offer. The bag was not heavy, and she did not like to trust it out of her own hand. This refusal made the lad look at her twice, instead of conveying her luggage for her and merely thinking of the pay. He wondered "why folks would carry their own bags themselves, grudging a poor cove a copper or two."

At the Metropolitan Station, Mrs. Danvers took a ticket for Bishopsgate Street. Arriving there in a quarter-of-an-hour, she made her way, with Clarice's arm in hers, to Liverpool Street Station. Here they had a little time to wait, and she compelled the girl to drink some hot tea

and eat a biscuit. Then she took another ticket and led her silent companion once more to the train.

As Clarice seated herself in the third-class carriage, whither Mrs. Danvers had piloted her, she seemed to be seized by some new and perplexing emotion. She put up her veil and looked at Mrs. Danvers with quivering lips and startled eyes.

"Where are we going?" she asked, faintly.

"To Nigel," was Mrs. Danvers' prompt reply. And then she drew down the girl's veil, and told her to sit still and they would soon be at home.

They got out at Old Ford, a district situated beyond Bethnal Green, at the extreme East End. Once more Mrs. Danvers took Clarice by the arm and walked out with her from the station into the open road. She walked forward a little way, looking neither to the right nor left. Then she stopped. Some landmark seemed to have caught her eye. She waited, put her bag down on the pavement beside her, and sighed.

They had not long to wait. A man's figure, enveloped in a long great-coat, advanced with a quick, firm tread towards them. He hesitated, passed by the two women once, then turned round; Clarice had stretched out her hands to him with a sudden cry of "Nigel!" He had hardly recognised her in her disguise, but she had known him by his bearing and his tread.

"My love!" He put his arms round her and kissed her passionately. "My love! my own! my darling!" It was all that he could say. He had saved her—he thought that he had saved her—at last; it was not yet too late; and never should she set foot in her father's house again until Nigel Tremaine himself could lead her thither as a free and happy wife! It was this thought that prompted that sudden outburst of loving words, that tender clasp, that rain of kisses on cheek and lip and brow. The darkness favoured him; for a moment he felt as if they two stood alone together in the universe, and could let the world go by unknowing and unknown.

"Have we far to go?" said Mrs. Danvers, quietly.

Nigel came to himself with a start, and offered her his hand.

"I thank you," he said simply, yet earnestly; "and some day Clarice will thank you, too." Then, with a resumption of his usual manner—"We have a quarter-of-an-hour's walk before us. Let me take your bag. As we go, I will tell you the rest of our programme."

An unusual buoyancy seemed to pervade his whole being. His step was light, his voice cheerful, his keen blue eyes bright and proud. It was evident that he was sanguine about the future.

"Your journey was a successful one, then?" he said, almost gaily.

"I think so—yes. I do not think they can trace us. What have you to tell me, Mr. Tremaine?"

"First of all, you know, you must call me by my proper name," said Nigel, cheerfully. "I wish it was a less uncommon name, but for Clarice's sake, I must not change it. I am Nigel Wilson, your nephew; and this is my sister Caroline, whom we call Carry. We used to call you Carry once, did we not, my darling? You will not mind being called Carry again?"

"No," said the girl, looking up at him with wistful affection. "Not by you."

"And you are Mrs. Wilson," Nigel continued. "Wilson seemed to me, as I said in my letter, a convenient, ordinary kind of name that tells nothing. Your husband was a clergyman, now dead. Your husband's brother, our father, was a lawyer. That is true, in a sense; my father did practise at the bar for some years; but, of course, I have had to lay truth on one side. I am a commercial traveller—that explains my long absences from home—and my sister is in very delicate health. You have a small independency, but would be glad to give a few music lessons to eke out your slender means. I have not absolutely said all this, but I have said part and hinted the rest. Does she understand what she is to do?"

"No; I have said nothing."

"I must prepare her then. Clarice, my darling."

"Yes, Nigel."

"You know this lady. I want you to give her a new name. She is not Mrs. Danvers any longer, she is Mrs. Wilson. Do you understand? You are never to call

her Mrs. Danvers any more. Her name—to you—is——”

He hesitated a little. Mrs. Danvers finished the sentence.

“Aunt Mary,” she said, quietly.

“Aunt Mary,” said Nigel, with a certain momentary embarrassment, which he passed off with a faint laugh, “Aunt Mary; your aunt and mine. Let me hear you call her by her name.”

Clarice looked at him and then at Mrs. Danvers. She did not understand, but she was obedient. She said the name submissively.

“Aunt Mary. Not Mrs. Danvers any longer. I will try to remember.”

“And, my darling, don’t say the name ‘Mrs. Danvers’ at all, if you can help it. If you do, do you know what will happen? I may have to go away from you and not see you for a long time. Remember that you are not to talk of Mrs. Danvers any more.”

“I will try to remember,” she said again, looking distressed.

“That will do,” said Mrs. Danvers to Nigel, in a low tone. “That is enough for one night.”

“And,” said Nigel, rather more slowly, “I have followed my mother’s counsel in one particular, and brought my old nurse, Martha Judson, to town with me. She is more than sixty years of age, and has been in our family forty years. She is thoroughly trustworthy and thoroughly kind, and can keep a secret to her life’s end. We have always said of her that to tell Martha anything was like telling it into a grave; she never spoke of it again. You will find her at the house to which we are going.”

Mrs. Danvers made no comment. She could well understand that Mrs. Tremaine had sent her faithful old servant somewhat as a check upon her actions, but she did not resent the implied suspicion. It was enough for her that Nigel did not manifest a similar feeling.

They stopped at last in a narrow side street, before an unpretentious-looking little house, one of a row of houses all alike.

“Number 5, John Street, Old Ford,” said Nigel, easily. “That is our address for the present. Our landlady’s

name is Snape—Mrs. Snape. She has a husband somewhere in the background, I believe."

He was talking with unusual vivacity, perhaps a little forced. Mrs. Danvers kept silence; Clarice trembled upon his arm.

He had laid his hand upon the little iron gate before the house, and was about to push it open, when Mrs. Danvers arrested him.

"One moment," said she. "You are risking something—on my recommendation. You are doubtful about the success of our experiment. If you like we can even now relinquish it. If you repent I will take her back."

The smile had faded from Nigel's face. His eyes were as steady as her own. Not a muscle of his face quivered. He answered, curtly :

"I shall never repent."

"You will weary of it?"

"Of nothing, until I have made her my wife."

Mrs. Danvers bowed her head. "Let us go in then," she said, and pushed open the little gate.

Almost as soon as she had done so the front door opened. The landlady had been on the watch. She was a meek-looking person, with a subdued and feeble voice, but she seemed obliging and respectful. A small servant hovered in the background. Mistress and servant were vaguely surprised that there was no cab and no luggage.

"We are going to get our luggage, presently," said Mrs. Danvers, in her quiet tones. "Are these the rooms? Yes, I think you have made a very good choice, Nigel."

Her instant adoption of the *rôle* she was to play gratified and astonished Nigel. His blue eyes danced with amusement. He turned to her with some slight answer on his lips; but the words died away before they were uttered. Mrs. Danvers had put up her veil. And then he perceived for the first time that she was a very different looking person from the Mrs. Danvers whom he had seen in the garden. She gave him a warning glance, however, which recalled him to a sense of his own part.

"Here is Martha," he said, as a grey-haired old woman in a cap advanced from an inner room to meet them, and the landlady still hovered in the rear.

"Well, Martha, how are you?" said Mrs. Danvers, shaking hands with the old servant, as if she had known her for the last twenty years. "I hope you find your room comfortable? I think we had better have some tea before we go out again, Nigel, and I will get Carry to bed at once. She is very tired, poor child. Ah, this is the bedroom."

The bedroom opened from the sitting-room by folding doors. Both rooms were on the first floor, and were of moderate size. The rooms that were to belong to Nigel and Martha respectively were on a higher storey. Mrs. Danvers called the old servant to follow her and shut the door of communication between the two rooms. Nigel looked rather disconcerted by this sudden disappearance, but contented himself by directing Mrs. Snape to send up tea immediately. He had ordered what was a sumptuous repast to the inhabitants of John Street—eggs, bacon, mutton chops, and tea; and Mrs. Snape herself had added suggestions of Madeira cake and marmalade. Moreover, Martha had been put by Mrs. Tremaine in charge of a hamper of country produce, which was likely to be more acceptable to Clarice than the results of Mrs. Snape's cookery.

Nigel waited with some impatience for Mrs. Danvers' return.

On her entering the room, he asked, ruefully, "Isn't she coming back?"

"She is tired," said Mrs. Danvers, smiling. "Besides, I have a little difficulty about clothes. I do not want her to be seen in those she was wearing at Charnwood. I must go out almost immediately, or the shops will be shut. Hush, say no more at present."

Tea was brought in. Mrs. Danvers carried in a cup to Clarice, as well as some food which the girl was too weary and excited to touch, then ate and drank a little herself, and prepared to go out. Clarice was left under old Martha's charge. Nigel accompanied Mrs. Danvers.

She went to the Mile End Road and commenced a series of purchases, during some of which he was banished from the shop, and in others allowed to look on. She made her transactions as short as possible, but could

not bring them to a close for more than an hour. Finally, she went into a portmanteau shop; selected two of the largest, and one small one, and directed Nigel to place the parcels with which he was laden inside them—rather to the amazement of the shopman, who was just closing for the night.

Then, with great difficulty they procured a cab, and were driven, with their new portmanteaus, to the door of Mrs. Snape's house.

Later in the evening, Nigel turned to Mrs. Danvers and said:

"I fancied that by this time I should have begun to understand you a little. But I am more puzzled than ever."

"I am going to explain myself," she said, quietly.

He had to wait some time, however, before she spoke again.

"Look at me," she said, at last. "Do I seem very different to you?"

"Very different. You have disguised yourself completely."

She smiled.

"The other was my disguise. *This* is my natural self."

"What!" said Nigel, hastily. "You were disguised while you lived at Sir Wilfred Vanborough's?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Mrs. Danvers had grown pale. She did not look at him as she replied.

"I wished," she said, "to hide myself from Constantine Jacobi's knowledge, and yet to keep guard over his actions. If he had seen me as I am now he would have recognised me—and been afraid."

"Been afraid?"

"Desperately afraid. And, but for Joan's sake—but for Geoffrey's sake—I would not have left him in ignorance. But the time was not ripe."

She mused for a little while, her hands clasped before her upon her knees.

"It is not ripe yet," she said. "Let him fill up the measure of his crimes. I told you—did I not?—that his wife was living still?"

"Yes."

She rose and lifted her arms a little.

"Look at me," she said. "I am like other women. I do not look as if a blight had fallen upon me—as if my heart were buried in a grave? And yet this is so. It seems to me that I am the most wretched woman of all women who have ever lived."

With his eyes Nigel asked her why. He dared not speak.

She turned to him with a magnificent gesture of despair. "Pity me!" she said in a voice of exceeding bitterness. "Pity me. I am Constantine Jacobi's wife. I am Maddalena Vallor!"

CHAPTER XXIX

JACOBI'S POSITION

"WHAT do I care, after all, whether she is found or not?" said Constantine Jacobi to himself, savagely biting the end of his cigar and then throwing it far away over the parapet of the Thames Embankment, as a sort of relief to his feelings.

The scowl that he wore upon his handsome face was anything but pleasant. He was absorbed in the consideration of facts which gave him real cause for anxiety. He reviewed his position. He firmly believed that his wife was dead. He did not think that, with their utmost efforts, Geoffrey and Nigel could prove that Maddalena had not been drowned seven years ago. He fancied that they had been deluded by some South American Pepita or Juana, who had thought to gain something by palming herself off upon them as Jacobi's wedded wife, and in his sleeve he laughed at them for their credulity. But he did believe that when Geoffrey regained his senses he might prove against him the attempt to rob and murder Nigel Tremaine, that had caused his expulsion from the camp upon the Pampas. The witness from South America might be Luke Darenth, Carson, or

Hiram Gregg. Even the fact—the small fact, as it seemed to him—that he had stolen, would destroy his credit once and for all with Sir Wilfred Vanborough.

Geoffrey's accident was indeed a fortunate circumstance for Jacobi. It gave him a long space of time in which to mature his plans. Nigel Tremaine could evidently prove nothing against him without the help of other witnesses; it was Geoffrey who might at once have identified him as the man who had been expelled from the camp for the attempt on Nigel's life. As long as Geoffrey lay insensible, as long as Geoffrey was well out of the way, so long might Constantine Jacobi enjoy comparative security. If he could but have married Clarice, and left the country before the bursting of the storm!

Should he throw up the game and go back to South America with his savings? No, not yet. The passion of revenge was strong in him. He had a grudge against Geoffrey. Was there no way in which to make him suffer yet?

If Geoffrey were out of the way, Jacobi himself would be safe. The thought recurred to him again and again with frightful persistence.

Then the blow that was even greater than that given by the interruption of the wedding fell upon him in all its force. Clarice disappeared, suddenly and swiftly from his ken, and left no trace behind.

He could not understand his own state of mind. He could not understand why Clarice's face should be present to him as it was. He was sure that he hated her with all the force of which he was capable, and yet he was consumed by the one over-mastering, passionate desire to see those sorrowful eyes of hers once more, to hold that slender hand in his, to call that white, fragile, delicate creature, at whose weakness he had jeered, over whose pride he had sought in vain to triumph, his own, in face of all the world, and though all the world forbade.

He was not used to the analysis of feeling. He had not given a name to the subtle attraction which Clarice exercised over him. If he called it anything, he called it hate; but it was perilously like something that was not hate at all, but love.

It was the persistency of these dreams that had caused him almost to discontinue the use of opium for a time. But the physical suffering that this abstinence entailed was growing to be more than he could bear.

He roused himself at last from his meditations with a new light in his eyes. A fresh idea had struck him. As he hailed a hansom and drove to the railway station, as he seated himself in a corner of the railway carriage and looked absently at the passing rows of chimneys, of winding streets, of country fields and lanes through which the train was speeding on its way northward, Jacobi was pondering whether his new idea could or could not be turned to good account as a means of compelling Nigel Tremaine and the Vanboroughs to reveal the hiding-place of Clarice. Nigel could do so if he would; of that he was sure; and he believed that Gilbert and Sir Wilfred were not so ignorant as they professed to be.

On his arrival at Charnwood Manor he made certain arrangements for the further consideration of his idea. He talked of business matters until Sir Wilfred grew weary and retired to his own room. Then Jacobi sought out a bunch of keys which had already done good service, and locked himself into Sir Wilfred's study.

He opened the desk, where the baronet's most private papers were always kept. Then he touched the spring of a secret drawer, which he had not opened for several weeks, and took out a large blue envelope.

With another elongation of his lips—half smile, half sneer—he read the inscription upon the envelope. "Papers relative to the cause of Geoffrey Vanborough's departure from England in the year 1877."

He opened the envelope and drew out a folded paper. Had there been only one when last he looked inside that drawer? Hastily he unfolded the solitary sheet. An exclamation escaped his lips; an expression of utter dismay and perplexity crossed his face as the paper dropped from his fingers and fluttered to the floor. For all that the blue envelope now contained was a sheet of blank paper.

CHAPTER XXX

MERLE'S NEW FRIEND

MERLE'S fingers were wandering idly over the keys of her piano one afternoon in March, when a visitor was announced.

She heard his name, but it was one that was totally unknown to her—"Dr. Burnett Lynn." A faint expression of surprise was visible upon her face as she found herself confronted by a dark, lean, saturnine-looking man, with piercing eyes which gave her a very scrutinising glance as she slightly returned his profound bow.

"May I hope that I do not come as an entire stranger?" he said, with the ease of a man who finds himself welcome everywhere, and can make himself at home under the most untoward circumstances. "I had the pleasure of knowing Mr. Vanborough when he was abroad, and I believe that he expects me."

"I am sorry, then, that he happens to be out at present," said Merle, running over in her mind the list of Gilbert's acquaintances, and finding none whose description tallied exactly with that of the man before her. She remembered, however, that Gilbert had met a Mr. Lynn in Florence some years before her marriage, and decided that this Mr. Lynn was her visitor. "I think I have heard of you from my husband," she went on, with the frank and pleasant manner which had already rendered her a favourite among Gilbert's friends, and which won her an unwonted tribute of admiring approval from Burnett Lynn's critical eyes. "You were very kind to him I know. He will be in before long."

She rang for tea, and before he knew well what he was doing, Burnett Lynn found himself installed in one of the luxurious chairs which were, to many people, among the special charms of Merle Vanborough's pretty drawing-

room, and she was sitting opposite to him, talking with more readiness and self-possession than he, for the moment, felt himself to have at command.

Was this charming woman Geoffrey's wife? Had he found time, then, to get married in the few weeks that he had been at home? Burnett Lynn was perplexed, confounded by this sudden turn of events, and it did not yet occur to him that he had strayed by mistake into the house of Sir Wilfred Vanborough's younger son, of whom he had very vaguely heard.

For a few minutes the two talked on different subjects, then tea was brought in, and while he was drinking the cup that Merle poured out for him, he made the discovery of her real relationship to Geoffrey Vanborough.

"You met my husband in Florence, did you not?" said Merle, as he took the cup from her hands.

"I had not that pleasure. I met Mr. Vanborough in South America."

"Oh!" Merle flushed a little, the awkwardness of the situation rushing upon her all at once; then she smiled very slightly. "I think it must be my husband's brother whom you know," she said. "Geoffrey Vanborough, not Gilbert."

"Certainly, Geoffrey Vanborough." Burnett Lynn looked at her in some perplexity. "I beg your pardon; have I not the honour of speaking to Mrs. Geoffrey Vanborough?"

"Oh, no," said his hostess hastily, while the flush deepened upon her fair cheek. "Geoffrey is my husband's brother. It is he who went to South America—not Gilbert."

"Ah," said Burnett Lynn to himself, after a covert glance of scrutiny, "she is fond of her husband. Happy man! And he is not Geoffrey. Then I am here under false pretences," he said aloud, as he rose with a smile. "I fear I have no claim on your hospitality, Mrs. Vanborough. Perhaps, however, you would kindly inform me what has become of my friend Geoffrey?"

"You do not know!" said Merle, softly, yet with a little wonder in her tone. "Ah, you left South America before you could get news of him, no doubt. I am so

sorry. Please sit down, and I will tell you about poor Geoffrey."

"Is he dead?" Burnett Lynn questioned himself, with a startled recognition of the fact that her candid eyes had grown soft and shadowy as if from recent grief. "But no, he cannot be, or she would wear mourning for him. I have heard nothing," he said seriously, as he complied with her request.

"He had just arrived at Charnwood Station," Merle explained, with the same grave intentness of look, "when an accident happened to him. He was struck down upon the railway line and almost killed. He has lain insensible ever since."

"Ever since? But how long has that been?" said the doctor, hastily.

"Nearly four weeks," she answered. "Nobody seems to know what is the matter with him. He has not spoken one word to any of his friends since he came home; and we fear he never will. Is it not very sad?"

"Sad, indeed," said Burnett Lynn, with a glance full of heartfelt concern. He rose, and stood looking down into the fire for a moment or two. "I am very sorry to hear it," he said, at last. "And his friend and mine, Mr. Tremaine, did he arrive safely?"

"Oh, yes," said Merle; and then she stopped a little abruptly. She did not know on what footing Geoffrey and Nigel had been with this keen-faced man, who looked so grieved when he heard of Geoffrey's accident, and she was half afraid of incurring Gilbert's wrath by saying more than she ought to say to an entire stranger. She thought that he looked at her curiously; perhaps, however, this was only a fancy of hers, for his voice took a very ordinary tone as he said, presently:

"I should be pleased to see Mr. Gilbert Vanborough upon the business which brought me here in search of his brother, if you will kindly tell me when I shall find him at home."

He made a movement as if to go, but Merle's instinct of hospitality caused her to reply with some haste:

"He will be in soon; will you not wait until he comes? He would be sorry to miss you."

Burnett Lynn hesitated, remembering that a word had dropped from Nigel Tremaine's lips which had led him to conjecture that the brothers, Geoffrey and Gilbert, were not upon good terms with each other, and that Gilbert had consented to the proposed marriage of Jacobi with Clarice ; but he imagined, on second thoughts, that the quarrel, if there was one, would probably be suspended during Geoffrey's illness, and that Gilbert would, of course, be glad to learn further particulars concerning Jacobi's character, unless, indeed, the marriage had already taken place. If it had already been consummated before Geoffrey's return, or if Geoffrey's accident had prevented his interfering, matters would be serious indeed. For Burnett Lynn had, that very Christmas, soon after his friend's departure, received lines assuring him that Maddalena Vallor was still alive and well.

He sat down, reflecting that Mrs. Gilbert Vanborough was not the proper person to question on these matters, and he talked very pleasantly to Merle for the next quarter-of-an-hour. At the end of that time a footstep was heard upon the stairs, and a hand laid upon the handle of the door.

"My husband has come in," said Merle, softly.

The doctor noted, almost against his will, the wistful tenderness that crept into her face, the faint anxiety that deepened the colour of her eyes as she turned them towards the door.

"Fond of him ?—yes," he said to himself again ; "but not altogether a happy woman, for all that. I wonder what is amiss."

And then the door opened and Gilbert Vanborough came in.

Merle performed the little ceremony of introduction with her accustomed grace, and did not appear to notice the black shadow that darkened Gilbert's face as she uttered the stranger's name. It was a name that he had heard already, and he at once became bitterly angry with his wife for admitting to the house a man whom he had learned to regard as his own and Jacobi's bitterest enemy. Merle gave him some tea, spoke a few indifferent words, then quietly left the two together. She had learnt by

this time that Gilbert had secrets to which he gave her no admittance.

Oliver Burnett Lynn was meanwhile drawing his own conclusions.

"A weak face," he thought, as he looked at Gilbert. "Weak and unhappy, too. What is the skeleton, I wonder? Unhealthy, into the bargain. She is strong enough, mentally and physically, to be worth a better husband, I should imagine."

And then he addressed himself to the task before him.

"I came here by mistake, Mr. Vanborough, fancying, from information I had received, that this was the house in which your brother Geoffrey resided, as Mrs. Vanborough kindly explained. You will excuse my remaining, after I discovered my mistake, on the ground of the business which brought me to England, which concerns your family very nearly."

"Perhaps I had better give you the address of my father's solicitor," said Gilbert, coldly. "Business communications are generally addressed to him."

The doctor looked at him observantly.

"You will answer one question at any rate, I hope. Is your sister married to a man who calls himself Constantine Jacobi?"

"She is not. Allow me," said Gilbert, with marked emphasis, "again to refer you to Mr. Pengelly, my solicitor."

Burnett Lynn suddenly dropped the smooth and courteous manner which he had hitherto maintained, and spoke with startling abruptness.

"I shall do nothing of the kind, Mr. Vanborough. I address myself to Miss Vanborough's brother, to her father, if I can see him, as her proper protector. Surely it is of some interest to you to learn that Constantine Jacobi is a married man."

Gilbert recoiled a little as if struck by the force of his words, but answered after only a moment's pause.

"I have heard that accusation against Mr. Jacobi before. I have—I have—every confidence in Mr. Jacobi——"

"Every confidence in Mr. Jacobi? Heaven help you,

then!" said Burnett Lynn, with the brusque, caustic humour which was so natural to him, and which he had hitherto kept in check. "I had better see Mr. Pengelly, indeed."

He picked up his hat, and began to take his way to the door. But the sound of a gasp, a sigh, arrested him. He looked round. Gilbert had sunk back upon the sofa, with his head upon the cushions. He was in a dead faint. Doctor Burnett Lynn was at his side in a moment. Then he rang the bell sharply, placed the insensible man in a better posture, and dashed a tumbler of cold water over his face.

Merle and Nixon were on the spot almost immediately, but the swoon was a long one, and it was possible that, but for the doctor's presence and timely aid, Gilbert might never have recovered consciousness at all.

By slow degrees Gilbert Vanborough came to himself, and was sufficiently recovered to be helped by Nixon into his own room, which was on the same floor. Burnett Lynn had withdrawn a little into the background as soon as Gilbert recovered consciousness; but he did not like to leave the house until after the arrival of the medical man who attended the family, and for whom he had advised Merle to send at once.

The doctor, who entered while he was still pondering over the matter, proved, to their mutual surprise, to be an old acquaintance of Burnett Lynn's whom he had not seen for seven years or more. The two exchanged a few hasty words before Mr. Leigh was summoned to Mr. Vanborough's bedroom, and then Burnett Lynn was once more alone.

Less from curiosity than from an impatient need of employment, he made the circuit of the room, looking with some interest at the collection of beautiful things which Merle and Gilbert had amassed. He had not half exhausted the list of treasures, when the light sweep of a dress upon the floor made him aware that Mrs. Gilbert Vanborough had returned.

"I hope Mr. Vanborough is better," he said, quickly.

"Yes, thank you. Mr. Leigh has gone, and he seems inclined to sleep. Mr. Leigh tells me he knows you," Merle

said, for the first time in his presence allowing herself to give way to a look of almost prostrate fatigue and sadness, that gave a very pathetic expression to her fair and youthful beauty. "He asked me to tell you that a message came for him to go elsewhere immediately, and that he hoped you would call at his house as soon as possible. I wanted to ask you myself, privately, whether my husband had been agitated, or vexed in any way, during his conversation with you, or whether the attack came on suddenly, without any apparent cause. That was why I did not try to detain Mr. Leigh at present."

She had seated herself as she spoke; her hands were crossed upon her lap, her shoulders bent a little forward, as if she bore a heavy weight upon them. The shadow upon her face was a very deep one now. Was her husband's illness, Burnett Lynn asked himself, its only cause?

He reflected for an instant before he answered her.

"I fear that what I said did agitate him to some extent, Mrs. Vanborough, but not, I should think, to so great an extent as to bring on this attack. I cannot tell, of course—but——"

"Ah!" said Merle, with a sudden flash of intuition, "it was something about Clarice?"

"Indirectly it was."

"Have you any news of her? Oh, nothing bad has happened, has it?" Merle rose up hastily with clasped hands and quickly flushing face. "Do you know where she is?"

"Where she is?" Doctor Burnett Lynn could not help repeating her words with some bewilderment of tone. It was evident that he did not understand.

"Do you not know?" she said, almost impatiently. "Oh, I thought that by this time everybody had heard. We have lost her—lost Geoffrey's sister. She has disappeared, and no one knows where she has gone. If you know anything of her, you will tell me, will you not?"

"Certainly I would if I could," he answered. "But I am sorry to say that I know nothing about Miss Vanborough. I was not aware until this moment of—her—her disappearance."

Merle turned away with an irrepressible little sob.

"Poor Clarice!" she said, almost below her breath. "I hoped—I hoped that you had brought us news of her."

She went to the mantelpiece, leaned her elbow upon it, and put her hand for a moment to her eyes. Burnett Lynn watched her with mute concern and pity. But he did not like to break the silence until she turned round again and spoke with her usual sweet and gracious calm.

"I beg your pardon for my hastiness," she said. "You do not know, perhaps, what it is to live in this atmosphere of constant anxiety and deferred hope. We all suffer from it—my husband especially."

"It is bad for him," he said, in a low tone.

"Yes;" she sighed, paused a little, and then proceeded more rapidly. "Your news did not relate to her, then?"

"To Constantine Jacobi, only. Not that his name is Jacobi, any more than mine is," said Burnett Lynn, bluntly.

"Ah," she said, "you do not like Mr. Jacobi. Neither do I."

In the maze of doubt and perplexity which Burnett Lynn was about to thread during the next few weeks, he often recurred to the memory of those few simple, outspoken words, as if it were the clue that would ultimately lead him back to common, every-day life—a charm against the perils to which he saw that deceit and dissimulation were exposing him. He felt instinctively that Merle Vanborough would speak the truth in all circumstances and at any cost.

"I certainly do not like him," he said. "But all that I wanted to tell Mr. Vanborough amounts to this—that I have good reason for believing that he has a wife still living, and that therefore his proposals for marrying Miss Vanborough would be entirely out of the question."

"We shall all be very thankful if that is proved," said Merle, gravely. "Perhaps, then, Clarice will come back. I was always afraid——" She stopped for a moment, and then said, "I do not think she cared for Mr. Jacobi."

Burnett Lynn was almost amused by this very quiet rendering of the facts.

"So I inferred," he said, "from my friends, Geoffrey and Nigel Tremaine."

"Have you seen Nigel Tremaine lately?" said Merle, with a quick turn of her head.

"Not since I landed."

Merle stood irresolute. Her clear eyes examined Doctor Burnett Lynn with a sudden look of doubt and inquiry.

"Do you want him for anything? Can I do anything for you?" he said, drawing a step nearer to her, with the sense of comradeship which her frank trust in him had already inspired.

"I have not seen Mr. Tremaine much," she said, rather hesitatingly. "I know very little of him. But I always thought him upright, and honourable and good."

"So he is, Mrs. Vanborough."

"But Gilbert thinks," Merle continued, dropping her eyes, and playing nervously with one of the trinkets upon her watch chain, "that Mr. Tremaine knows—knows where Clarice is."

"I should not think that likely," said Burnett Lynn, after a pause. But Merle noticed that he did not say he thought it impossible.

"It would be too cruel," she said, shortly. "He would never, never take her away and let none of us know." Then she looked him in the face, and clasped her hands. "You would not think it right, would you, and if you are his friend, you will ask him and tell him how anxious we are about her? Tell him that we will keep her away from Mr. Jacobi, and take care of her till she is well again, and can marry Nigel! Tell him how unhappy her father is, and how we all suffer on her account! Don't help him; help us!"

Burnett Lynn moved back, as though to be out of the range of the fire of eloquent pleading in her deep blue eyes. Not but that it moved him strangely, but he was loath to bind himself to any side, good or bad, until he knew more of the whole story.

He answered, therefore, kindly and gravely, but with some evasiveness—"You may be assured that if I give Nigel Tremaine any advice it will be to act openly and frankly, Mrs. Vanborough. But I do not expect to find that he knows more about Miss Vanborough than we do ourselves."

Merle's hands fell to her side ; she uttered a long sigh.

" You are right, I dare say," she said, mournfully. " But I would give anything to bring her back." Then, in a much lower tone—" This all makes Gilbert so miserable ! "

There was a short silence. Burnett Lynn was preparing to take his leave, when she looked up and said, rather wistfully :

" You must forgive me if I have spoken foolishly—hastily. Forget what I have said if you like. But there is one thing more. You never saw my sister, did you ? Let me show you her portrait—it is in my husband's studio."

Burnett Lynn assented with a grave inclination of his head. Merle led the way. She opened a door, pushed aside a curtain that hung over it upon the other side, and beckoned him to follow her.

CHAPTER XXXI

BURNETT LYNN IN LONDON

OLIVER BURNETT LYNN took his leave, and went out into the old-fashioned Chelsea streets and squares with a curious feeling of bewilderment. He had come these thousands of miles across the sea, and found himself, on the first day of his arrival in London, involved in an extraordinary maze of doubt and perplexity. His own desire to find Madame Vallor, as well as his friendship for Geoffrey and Nigel, and his wish to thwart Jacobi in his infamous schemes had precipitated his action. He had communicated with the firm of solicitors in New York who sent him the yearly letters, which informed him that Madame Vallor was still alive and well, but had extorted from them only the information that their client was now resident in England, and that they were not permitted to give her address.

But as soon as he learnt that Maddalena Vallor was in England, he made up his mind to start at once for London and Charnwood.

In due time Constantine Jacobi received word that Burnett Lynn had arrived in England, but the information only puzzled him; he could not remember Burnett Lynn at all. The doctor's name on board the *Mary Jane* had impressed him very little. And when Gilbert wrote him a few lines, bidding him be on his guard, Jacobi tossed the letter aside, contemptuously. "Who is Burnett Lynn that I should be afraid of him?" he said. The link of connection was as yet in no wise clear.

He was again resident at Charnwood Manor, although all the neighbourhood cried shame on Sir Wilfred Vanborough for allowing him to stay.

He began to make frequent visits to Hillside Farm, where he would always ask to see Geoffrey, and expressed great interest in his abnormal condition. Joan, with an innate distrust and dislike of him, would never leave him alone with her patient. She watched him with the eyes of a lynx, and could not be induced to leave the room when he was there. Jacobi complained of this manifestation of her feeling towards him, in pathetic tones, to Mrs. Seth Darenth, whom he found one day alone in the porch, watching dutifully for her husband's return from work.

"Oh, we all know what Joan is like," said Patty, pushing back her curly hair with a look of ill-humour. "She takes such ridiculous fancies into her head sometimes!"

"What has Joan been doing now?" he said, leaning against the door-post, and glancing at her rosy face with a gleam of admiration in his sunken, haggard eyes.

"Oh, nothing; only Joan made such a fuss about little things—would not let her lay her hand on anything that belonged to a Vanborough. Why, there were some letters or something that Miss Clarice had given her; she believed that Joan wore them next her heart!" and Patty tittered affectedly.

"Letters?" said Jacobi, only half attending. "Letters from Miss Vanborough to Joan?"

"Oh dear, no!" said Patty. "At least I don't think so; or else why should Miss Vanborough bring them here herself? Which she did, as far as I can make out, on the morning when she came here so early, as I dare say you remember."²

A sudden change came over Jacobi's face. His languid eyes opened with a flash of keen surprise. His complexion took a curiously yellow tint.

"You mean," he said, in a low, deliberate tone, "that Miss Vanborough brought some papers here when she came to your house that morning, and gave them to Joan?"

"Yes," said Patty, in an aggrieved way. "Seth saw her—he told me so. And she stuffed them into her dress, and I believe she's got them still. I know she has some papers that she's very careful of. I watched her to see."

"Did you see the papers?"

"No." Patty began to be a little alarmed at Jacobi's tone, and looked ready to cry. "I don't know anything about them. Perhaps they ain't the same, only—I—I——"

"All right, you need not spoil your pretty eyes by crying," said Jacobi, in a soothing tone. "Don't say anything more about those papers to anybody, Patty, do you hear? And perhaps you would like some new ribbons for your bonnet, eh? You must choose them for yourself; I haven't had time to do any shopping lately."

He slipped a sovereign into her hand as he spoke, and then walked away without waiting for her thanks. Patty was left with the gold piece in her hand, her cheeks aflame, her eyes alight with pleasure. "He is a real gentleman after all, or he wouldn't be so free with his money," was her comment, as she looked after his retreating figure. "I'll get myself that ostrich feather to-morrow; that's what I'll do! What can those papers be, I wonder, and where has he gone to now?"

Meanwhile, the search for Clarice was continued with unabated vigour.

Burnett Lynn had written, by Nigel's advice, to ask for an interview with Sir Wilfred Vanborough, in order to lay before him the proofs of the existence of Jacobi's wife; but had not yet received an answer. He employed himself in transacting certain business matters, and then in exploring some of the eastern districts of London, where he was amazed at the squalidity, the filth, the overcrowding, which he beheld.

It was towards seven o'clock on a Saturday evening, and he was wandering through a district beyond Bethnal

Green, which was as yet totally unknown to him, when his eye was struck by the graceful gait of a tall woman in black upon the pavement before him. Something in her carriage involuntarily recalled to his mind the memory of a woman whom he had vainly tried not to love; something in her walk reminded him of the movements of a figure which he had last seen upon a bleak hillside, with eyes turned towards the grey waves of a tumultuous sea.

He followed her, half mechanically, for he had no special curiosity to see her face. But opposite a shop she paused, and lifted for a moment the dark veil that was fastened to her bonnet.

With a sudden bound forward Burnett Lynn reached her side, and there stood still.

The woman dropped her veil.

CHAPTER XXXII

HER PROMISE

"MADDALENA!"

With the black veil drawn over her face, the shawl folded tightly round her shrinking form, she confronted him steadily, but spoke not a single word. For all the sign of recognition she gave him she might have never seen his face before.

"You know me!" he said, hurriedly, with a certain fearfulness apparent in his face which was seldom to be found there. "I am sure you have not forgotten my name; for you have let me hear—once a year, it has been only—that you were still alive. Do I need to name myself to you?"

She had seemed to be looking at him through her black veil; but at the conclusion of his sentence she turned away and walked rapidly down the street, almost as though she had not heard his words. Burnett Lynn was not minded to be left behind. Without a moment's hesitation he turned and walked beside her—behind her sometimes, when the exigencies of the passing crowd or narrow

pavement required it, but never once losing her from his sight. His patience was rewarded. Arrived in a quiet, dimly lighted street, she halted, put back her veil, and looked at him.

"What do you want with me?" she said.

"What have I wanted for the last seven years?" he answered. "I have never asked for more than a remembrance, a word of greeting, a name. You need not grudge me these."

She began to walk slowly forward. "I have sent you, then, all that you wanted, every Christmas, for the sake of my promise. If I had not promised—if I had not been grateful to you, Oliver Burnett Lynn—you would never have heard my name again."

"You promised to think of me as a friend," said Burnett Lynn, impetuously. "Is this the way you treat your friends? If you had been ill or in trouble, could I have come to you? Had you any thought of the terror, the anxiety, I felt sometimes, when Christmas-time drew near and I had not heard whether you were alive or dead? Little, indeed, I had on which to nourish my memories of you—the bare fact that you were still in life, that you were well! Was I so inconsiderate of you, so passionate, so hasty, that you could not trust me to be your brother and your friend?"

"No," she said gently. "No, it was not that."

"What then? Why should you not have allowed me to help you when you needed help? Alone in the world, as you must have been, a friend might have aided you. As it is—I will not say that my life has been spoiled, even for you; but I have found it very bitter and very little worth. Had it not been for certain chances that I fancied I saw before me in the future, I think I should have thrown it away long ago."

"I have not wanted help. You were the better for not knowing me."

"What have you been doing," he said, with something like a look of anxiety upon his face, "all these seven years?"

"I have not asked for your help, Doctor Burnett Lynn, and I am not bound to answer your questions."

He turned his head towards her for a moment, then

looked down in silence. She continued her quiet, even pace along the street. The day was growing dusky; the lamps were being lit as they silently entered the Victoria Park, and directed their steps towards the quietest corner that they could find.

Madame Vallor sat down at last upon a wooden bench. Burnett Lynn stood before her in rather an aggressive attitude, with frowning brow and bitten lip.

"You answer me so coldly—so cruelly," he said, "that I cannot refrain from reminding you that there was a time when you needed help; there was a time when you accepted it—even from me."

"I have not forgotten that time," she said, almost inaudibly.

"If you have not forgotten it, how can you speak as if I were a perfect stranger? Well, I will ask no questions. I will only ask you not to think that I will tamely submit to be sent away from you as if I were no better than a troublesome hound, as you sent me away before. I was a boy then; I am a man now, and I cannot, I will not, endure such treatment."

She listened in some surprise. Oliver Burnett Lynn had not been so masterful in the days when she knew him first. After a short pause, she asked slowly:

"What would you have? If I refused to see you again, what would you do?"

"Do? I would not accept the dismissal. I claim, at least, a friend's right—a brother's right—to watch over you. If you give me no information now, as to your home, your manner of life, I give you fair warning that I will find them out for myself."

"You are less kind and less manly than you used to be," said Madame Vallor, looking straight into his eyes, and speaking with strange calmness. "You would not have said that seven years ago."

"I did not know myself seven years ago. I could not tell how much you were to me then."

"Hush! Say that no more. We are nothing to each other."

"Nothing?"

"You are my friend—be so still. Come," she said,

making a great effort to seem cheerful, "I will not leave you again so long in the dark. I will trust you. Give me your address, and I will write to you in a couple of days. I will tell you where to find me. You will trust me so far, will you not? You do not think I would deceive you, Oliver?"

She had never called him by his first name before, hardly ever spoken to him in so friendly a tone. His heart gave a sudden leap of joy. Then it stood still. For there was something in the expression of her face, something in the wandering of her restless eyes, which he did not like. In spite of himself, he could not trust her as he had meant to do.

"Maddalena," he said, "tell me one thing. If your husband were to claim you again, would you put yourself into his power? Would the English law give you no redress?"

She shook her head.

"I do not know. But if he tells me to follow him to another country, I shall be forced to go. I am his wife. And I am a Catholic, and my Church makes the marriage vow of more importance than does yours. I am bound to him, and he to me, as the English Prayer Book says—'until death us do part.' And death is long—long—in coming."

"You must not sacrifice yourself for him—for anyone," said Burnett Lynn. "I will ascertain the necessary steps to be taken; you can get a writ of protection against him. 'Cruel desertion' is sufficient reason for that."

"We will talk of that next week," she said, with a faint smile. "Now let me go; I have stayed too long already."

Once more they turned towards the gate, and said good-bye just outside the park.

"Remember, this time," he said, jealously, "that you have promised to see me again in a day or two."

"I will remember," she said, gently. "And I will write."

Thus they separated. She went back, through an intricate maze of narrow streets, to arrive, faint and exhausted, at Number 5, John Street, Old Ford; he found his way, with much more difficulty, to the wider squares

and thoroughfares of western London, and reached his lodgings in a curious state of mingled disappointment and elation.

The next two days passed slowly indeed to him. On Tuesday, at the latest, he hoped to have a letter, but none came. On Wednesday he was obliged to go down to Charnwood to confer with Sir Wilfred concerning his knowledge of Jacobi's past life and character.

Sir Wilfred, perhaps, saw the truth of his representations more clearly than he liked to allow; but he could not unbend so far as to acknowledge that he had been in the wrong. And after all, Jacobi was suffered to come and go to and from Charnwood Manor as freely as if his character had never been impugned.

On leaving Charnwood Manor, Burnett Lynn inquired his way to the Hillside Farm. He found Geoffrey still in the strange condition of apparent insensibility in which his accident had left him. Clever as Burnett Lynn was, he was puzzled, like the other doctors before him. He exchanged a few words with Joan Darenth, told her when and where he had last seen her brother Luke, and finally went back to London in a somewhat depressed and unhappy mood.

That mood was destined to be prolonged throughout several weeks, as during that time he heard nothing from Maddalena Vallor. His search for her in the vicinity of Mile End Road proved fruitless, and as time went on he almost gave up the hope of finding her or of hearing from her again.

CHAPTER XXXIII

SISTERS-IN-LAW

JOAN DARENTH was conferring one day with Doctor Ambrose, when Mrs. Seth Darenth presented herself at the door of Geoffrey's sick-room with her usual pert and saucy air.

"Joan," she said, "you're wanted."

"Who wants me?"

"Mr. Jacobi," said Patty, taking good care that her words should reach the ear of the doctor. "From Sir Wilfred, I believe."

"Does your father let that man come about the house?" said Doctor Ambrose, in a low tone to Joan.

"We can't help it, sir," Joan answered. "He comes from Sir Wilfred Vanborough."

The doctor gave a dissatisfied grunt.

"Why doesn't he see your father himself, then? Why need you go to see him?"

"Did he want me particularly, Patty?" asked Joan of her sister-in-law, who was still standing near the door.

"Yes, indeed he did." Patty tossed her head in a way that showed some offence. "He wouldn't tell me what he wanted, either," she said, in a sulky tone. "You'd better come quick, Joan. He says he can't wait." Then she turned and went out of the room, shutting the door sharply behind her.

Joan hesitated, looked at the doctor, then at the patient, and seemed disinclined to go.

"I'll take care of Geoffrey till you come back," said Doctor Ambrose, without looking round at her. "If you want any help, let me know. I suppose that fellow won't keep you more than five minutes."

"Thank you, sir. If you would stay I should be glad," said Joan, in a tone of relief, which proceeded from two causes—one, the fear of leaving Geoffrey under Patty's sole care; the other, the pleasure of knowing that she had a friend close at hand should Jacobi prove impertinent. She was not quite easy in her mind at the prospect of an interview with a man whom she equally disliked and dreaded.

Jacobi was standing in the cold and cheerless parlour, whither Patty had shown him, twirling his hat in his hand, and whistling in a jaunty manner as he glanced at the pictures upon the walls. When Joan entered he ceased whistling, and nodded carelessly.

"Good morning, Joan," he said.

Joan did not answer. His familiarity made her shrink into herself with an instinct of wounded pride to which

she was usually a stranger. Her silence, her grand, quiet dignity of face and form, as she stood and looked at the man who addressed her—she was considerably taller than he, and he had to raise his eyes to hers—somewhat disconcerted him. He almost wished that he had begun to treat her with more respect.

"I came to speak to you on business," he said, restlessly avoiding her intent gaze, and moving to and fro as he spoke. "We shall not be interrupted, I suppose?"

"I dare say not," Joan answered, quietly.

"Let me get to the point as quickly as possible, then," he said. "You remember the night—or rather the morning—on which Miss Vanborough left her home and made her appearance here?"

"Yes."

Jacobi suddenly placed both his hands upon the table, leaned forward, and fixed his eyes upon her face in a way which he thought might prove effective in alarming her. "You remember it?" he said, in a low tone; "do you also remember the fact that Miss Vanborough carried some papers in her hands?"

Joan's eyes met his unflinchingly. Now she understood why he had come.

"I remember all the circumstances of Miss Vanborough's arrival," she said, calmly. "Is that all? Because, if so, I will go. I am wanted upstairs."

"All?" said Jacobi, removing his hands from the table, and uttering a scornful laugh. "You know as well as I do, Joan Darenth, that it is not all. Where are the papers which Miss Vanborough carried in her hand?"

"Probably where Miss Vanborough put them," said Joan. "I have no concern with Miss Vanborough's papers, sir. I will bid you good morning."

"Not so fast," he answered, interposing himself between her and the door. "There is a word more to be said, my good girl. You have those papers in your possession."

Joan's eyes met his composedly. "Were they your papers?" she asked.

"If they were not mine, they were Sir Wilfred's. You have no right to them. You will please give them up to me."

"If they were Sir Wilfred's I should give them to Sir Wilfred, and to no one else," she replied. "But I was not aware that I had any papers belonging to Sir Wilfred Vanborough in my possession."

"You had better think twice before you refuse to give them up," said Jacobi. "Miss Vanborough abstracted them from her father's desk and placed them in your hands. We are quite aware of that. If you refuse to surrender them we shall call in the aid of the police. You have stolen important documents. You will stand in the dock as a thief."

Joan's face grew pale, but her eyelids did not quiver. She only said, "You cannot force me to surrender papers when you do not know whether I have them or not."

"What have you done with them, then? We know you had them."

"How do you know?"

"Your brother saw Miss Vanborough give them to you."

Joan was silent for a moment. A slight flush crept up to her cheek and stayed there. But she spoke collectedly.

"You have no proof, sir, that those were the papers which you have lost."

"Show me the papers that Miss Vanborough left with you."

Joan made no answer. It seemed as if she would not condescend to do so. Only her mouth took a haughtier curve, and a prouder light flashed in her eyes. The expression of her countenance irritated Jacobi almost beyond endurance.

"A search-warrant will soon settle this business," he said, with a sneer. Then, as Joan neither moved nor spoke, he said, with a sudden change of tone, "Do you know what harm you will do to Mr. Geoffrey Vanborough if you persist in this refusal to give up the papers?"

His words produced some effect now. The red blood mounted to her forehead, and then receded, leaving her very pale. "What do you mean?" she said, quickly.

"These papers," said Jacobi, in a deliberate tone, "are the documents which proved Geoffrey Vanborough guilty of theft and forgery."

"They are lying documents, then," said Joan, in a voice of scorn. "If you had ever known Geoffrey Vanborough, sir, you would have known that he was incapable of the baseness you attribute to him."

"Sir Wilfred is naturally anxious to retain them in his own keeping," Jacobi went on, as though he had not heard. "If you refuse to give them up he will be compelled to make their nature public, and obtain a warrant for stolen property concealed in this house."

"I don't believe he will do anything of the kind," said Joan, bluntly. "If the missing papers relate to the subject you mention, he will be only anxious that they should not fall into wrong hands; he will not wish to publish their contents."

"Everybody may not be disposed to judge Geoffrey Vanborough so favourably as yourself," said Jacobi, with a sneering intonation which once more brought the blood to Joan's face. "We all know how deeply you are interested in his welfare——"

He did not finish the sentence. He had gone too far.

Joan had laid her hands upon his arms—strong, firm hands they were, full of vigour and muscle, with a skin as soft as velvet—and quietly moved him out of her way. It was evident that her physical strength was twice as great as his. He was like a child in the strong clasp of her firm yet gentle fingers. Before he knew what she was about, she had moved him from her path and opened the door. He uttered a furious exclamation, and rushed forward to detain her. But in another moment the door was closed in his face, and when he opened it Joan had disappeared. He dared not follow her upstairs. He stood still, and called Patty.

"Dear me, sir, how you did frighten me," said Mrs. Seth Darenth, appearing out of the back premises, and wiping her hands upon her white apron. "Did you want anything?" Then she saw his face, livid and convulsed with anger, and drew back a little. "Is anything the matter?" she said, more timidly.

"Everything is the matter," said Jacobi, savagely striking his foot against the floor; "your precious sister-

in-law has defied me—insulted me. I'll make her repent it—and you, too, if you don't do what I tell you."

"It's what I always say to Joan," cried Patty, bursting into tears; "she'll bring us to ruin and misery with her tongue and her temper, and that's what she will. I'm sure it ain't my fault, for if I've told her once I've told her a dozen times."

Jacobi drew back a few steps into the parlour.

"Come here," he said, in a low tone, while his lips were still white with the look of vicious anger. "I want to speak to you."

Patty advanced within the door rather reluctantly, holding her apron to her eyes. Jacobi allowed a few minutes to elapse before he spoke.

"Listen to me," he said. "I want you to watch your sister-in-law. Can you do it?"

"I don't know, I am sure, sir. Joan's as close as death. She'll never tell me anything."

"I don't want her to tell you anything. I want you simply to keep an eye on her, and see what she does and where she goes. If she goes out, follow her, or set somebody else to follow her."

"I know who'd follow her," said Patty, letting her apron fall, "and that's my cousin Joel. He's a wild sort of chap, but he'd do anything for me."

"I'll make it worth his while," said Jacobi. "When she goes out of the house, during the next few days, either follow her yourself or let him do so. Watch whether she hides anything in any secret place. Find out, if you can, where she keeps any papers."

"It's the papers you want, is it? Well, you won't have much chance of laying your hands on them, Mr. Jacobi. She's sewed 'em up in a bag, and wears 'em under her dress for safety, I believe. I've watched her before now. Her room's next mine, and—and——"

"Well, what?"

"Well," said Patty, with some reluctance, "you won't mention it if I tell you?"

No, Jacobi would not mention it.

"There's a loose knot in the partition—it is but wood; and sometimes I've amused myself with taking it out and

looking through. I know she wears that bag always, and I believe it's got papers in it."

"You are a useful person indeed, Patty," said her visitor, with a sinister smile. "Well, watch to-night, and see whether she has the bag about her still, will you?"

"And what if she has?" said Patty, rather suspiciously.

"We must try to get it from her," Jacobi answered. "Has she read the papers? Of course she has, though. You will see your cousin Joel at once, will you not? And now I had better go."

He took his leave, not without making her a handsome present, which she took complacently.

Meanwhile, the doctor had gone, and Joan was left alone with Geoffrey. Left alone, she gave way to a flood of unusual emotion. Bending her face upon his pillow, she let the tears flow freely from her eyes for a few minutes, while the passionate sobs with which her bosom heaved were broken and intermingled with words and short disconnected sentences.

"My darling! my darling!" she said. "Now that you cannot hear me, I may call you so—my love! my love! No, I will never betray you, Geoffrey. They may do what they like, but they shall never have the papers. I will die before you suffer harm through me!"

Gradually her sobs died away; her words ceased. For a long time she remained kneeling at his bedside. A sigh escaped her occasionally, and once or twice a murmured prayer; but she wept no more. The outburst had done her good. After a time she looked up and gazed sadly at the pale, unconscious face before her. "Geoffrey!" she murmured, half aloud. "Oh, Geoffrey, I could almost wish I had spoken the truth to you while you could hear me! My love, how could I have loved any other man than you?"

But the paroxysm of passionate feeling was past. She left his side and devoted herself more assiduously than usual to the tasks of the day. Patty, who made an errand to the door of Geoffrey's room shortly afterwards, was surprised to see that, though her eyelids were red, her face was calm and almost cheerful.

"Won't you take a walk to-day?" said Mrs. Seth Darenth, a little awkwardly. "It's a fine day, and you haven't been out lately. I'll sit beside the Captain, if you like."

"Thank you, Patty," said Joan, touched by this unusual mark of consideration for her. "I should like a walk very much; but I don't think you need trouble to sit with Mr. Geoffrey. I'll get Mary Gray to stay with him." Mary Gray was an old servant whom Joan could thoroughly trust.

"Oh, very well," said Patty, shrugging her shoulders. "I'm sure I don't want to sit with him. It gives me a turn to look at him, lying like a dead man in that way day after day. I only wanted you to have a nice walk."

"It's very kind of you, Patty," said Joan, gratefully.

Patty pouted.

"It isn't kind at all," she said, flouncing away to the kitchen, where for a minute or two she felt honestly ashamed of herself. But her sense of shame was short-lived.

In the afternoon Joan came downstairs, equipped for walking. As soon as she was out of the house Patty ran to the garden gate, and looked anxiously up and down the road. Joan's tall and stately figure could be seen as she walked rapidly to the uplands beyond the farm. And following her, at some little distance, was the slouching figure of a man.

Jacobi paid another visit to the farm on the following morning; but his object was not this time to speak to Joan, but to Patty, whom he found in the orchard.

"Well, have you watched?" he said.

"Joel followed her when she went out yesterday," said Patty, readily. "She only walked straight forward all the way, he says; she didn't stop anywhere."

"Has she got the papers still there?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I watched her, as I said I would. I saw the bag hung round her neck as usual. And more than that. She turned the key in her door, and she sat down and ripped the bag up, and took all the papers out. And then what

does she do but go and read them all from beginning to end."

"Read them, did she?"

"That she did. And then she cried over them. I say, Mr. Jacobi, what's in those papers?"

"No business of yours, pretty Patty. And what did she do next?"

"Why, next," said Patty, in an injured tone, "she tolded up the papers, put them back in the bag, sewed it up again, and put it round her neck. I suppose she's got it there still. Night and day she's never without it. Won't she give you the papers?"

"No."

"What shall you do then?"

"With your help, Patty," said Jacobi, "I shall take them from her whether she will or no."

CHAPTER XXXIV

A CUP OF TEA

FOR the next day or two, things went quietly. Jacobi came daily to the farm on the pretext of inquiring after Geoffrey, and his errand seemed so natural to the farmer and his son that they never gave his visits more than a passing thought. It was only Joan whom they inspired with a vague distrust.

She did notice, however, that Patty's ornaments about this time greatly increased in number and value. To remonstrate was, however, an ungracious task, and one which for the present she thought she might defer until a more convenient season.

Patty herself at this time seemed unusually kind and amiable to Joan. She began to think that Patty had a kind heart, after all.

The weather had grown very hot. It was the height of summer, and the days were close and oppressive. Old Anthony was to spend the night at the farm, and Joan, who had a bad headache, was almost glad, for once, to think that she had not to sit up with Geoffrey.

"You don't look at all well, Joan," said Patty, sympathetically. "Suppose you go and lie down, and I'll bring you a cup of tea or something by-and-by."

"Thank you, I don't want anything," Joan answered. "But I think I will go and lie down; the weather makes one's head ache."

"Yes, it's the weather," said Patty, with rather an odd look, which, however, escaped Joan's observation. "There'll be a storm soon, I dare say. Good night, if you are going."

"Good night," said Joan. Then, moved by a sudden impulse, she put her arm round Patty and kissed her on the forehead. "You are very kind to me, dear," she said. "Thank you—and good night."

Patty did not return the kiss. She stood with her head studiously bent over her apron and made no answer. There was a tear in her blue eyes.

"I wish I hadn't promised, after all," she said to herself with some uneasiness, when Joan had left the room.

Farmer Darenth and his son had gone to a horse fair at some little distance from Charnwood. They would not be home until late. Patty first assured herself that the farm servants were all out of the way, then she tripped lightly down the garden path, crossed the orchard, and arrived at a little deserted building which had once been used as a hen-house, but was now in a very dilapidated condition. Here she tapped lightly with her fingers at the door. A key was turned in the lock from inside, and the door slightly opened. Patty pushed it further open, entered, and found herself face to face with Mr. Constantine Jacobi, who was smoking a cigarette.

"My goodness, Mr. Jacobi, you shouldn't smoke here," she said, with an affectation of alarm. "Suppose somebody came this way!"

"But you say that nobody does come this way, don't you?" said Jacobi. "Besides, people would think there was a tramp somewhere near—that would be all."

"Oh, yes, tramps smoke scented cigars, of course," said Patty, with what was intended to be withering sarcasm. "You'd better put it out, if you want to be safe, sir. I

don't know what Seth would say to me, I'm sure, if he knew what I was doing."

"He would say you were as clever as you were pretty," said Jacobi, carelessly; "and that would be saying a good deal. Well, show me the hole in the wall you spoke of."

Patty moved to one side of the building, and displaced some boards which covered a rather large aperture in the wall.

"There!" she said. "Now, if anybody comes to the door and knocks it in—for the lock is not safe, you know—you can get away through that hole. Or, if they come to the hole, you can get away through the door. I don't think you'll be caught if you are careful."

"Thanks," said Jacobi. "This is a capital place of concealment. I shall be comfortable enough here for a few hours. And how is Joan?"

"Joan has a headache," said Patty, looking uneasy again.

"A headache? Of course, that is what I meant her to have. What did you do with the stuff I gave you, Patty?"

"I put it into her tea, yesterday and to-day. It won't do her any harm, will it?"

"Of course not, you silly little creature. I don't want to do her any harm. I only wanted her to have a headache to-day, and you see I have accomplished my purpose."

"Yes, but you want me to give her something else, don't you?" said Patty, in a slightly reluctant tone.

"Only something to make her sleep a trifle more soundly than usual, my dear. You need not be afraid."

"You are sure it—it won't kill her?" said Patty, nervously. "She'll wake up all right, will she not?"

"Of course she will. What extraordinary ideas you have got in your mind!" said Jacobi, with a glance that was not a particularly pleasant one. "Do you want the ten pounds I promised you, or do you not? If you do, you must earn it."

Patty began to whimper. "I'm sure I'm ready enough to earn it," she said, plaintively. "It's only that I don't want to do any harm to Joan. If you're quite sure that she won't be hurt, I don't mind."

"I did not know you were so fond of your precious sister-in-law," said Jacobi, with a sneer. "However, as you are anxious about her welfare, I can assure you that my medicine will not have the slightest injurious effect. Now, are you ready to do what I tell you?"

"Yes," said Patty, in a submissive tone.

Jacobi produced a tiny bottle from his pocket. "Look here. I have mixed the exact dose in this bottle. All you have to do is to pour it into her tea and let her drink it. There is neither taste nor smell, and she will never dream of anything being amiss. She will be fast asleep in half-an-hour, and will not wake till morning. In an hour's time from the moment when you give her the cup of tea, go to her, take the bag from her neck, and bring it to me."

"Suppose she wakes up?" said Patty, fearfully.

"She can't wake. She wouldn't wake if a waggon and four horses drove through the room. You needn't be afraid. Then bring the bag and all that it contains to me."

"But what shall I say in the morning?" said Mrs. Seth Darenth, in helpless tones. "She will ask if I came into her room—if I know anything about it; she will tell father and Seth. What shall I do?"

"You little fool, you'll put the bag back when I've got out of it what I want. She will never know it has been touched unless she looks into it; and that perhaps she will never do. So calm your mind, Patty, my dear, and go and earn your ten pounds. It is half-past seven o'clock now. We shall not get our business done till nine. Your husband won't be home before half-past nine or ten. We have not too much time after all. Go and make her tea."

"When will you give me the ten pounds?"

"When you come back with the bag. See here," and Jacobi displayed upon the palm of his hand ten golden sovereigns. "These will be yours, pretty Patty, as soon as you have earned them."

Patty smiled, nodded, and departed, with the bottle hidden in her hand. Jacobi seated himself on a block of wood, and calmly resumed the smoking of his cigarette.

"I don't want any tea, really, Patty," said Joan, some ten minutes later, when Patty appeared at the bedside

with a cup and saucer in her hand, and a rather flushed, excited face.

"You must drink it now I've made it on purpose for you," said Patty, quickly. "Why, I thought you would be glad of it, Joan. I'm sure it would send you to sleep, and take your headache away."

"More likely it would keep me awake," said Joan, with a faint laugh. "Well, as you have so kindly made it, Patty, I will drink it."

She took the cup from Patty's hand, and drank its contents thirstily. She was evidently a little feverish. Patty stood by and watched her with frightened eyes. There was something diabolical to her simple mind in the notion of sending people to sleep against their will.

She said good night to Joan, and carried the cup and saucer downstairs, placing them carelessly in the scullery, to be washed by one of the maids. Patty was not formed to be a conspirator. She suddenly remembered that she had left the little bottle upon the table after she had emptied it into the cup of tea, and she advanced hastily to the table in order to secrete it. But the bottle was not there.

Patty felt a sudden qualm of fright. Then she consoled herself quickly. One of the stupid servants must have been inside the parlour and taken it away. She called out angrily:

"Mary—Bessy—where are you?" And as Bessy, a red-cheeked damsel of sixteen, appeared, Mrs. Seth Darenth made her accusation. "How dare you take my things away? Where is the bottle I left on the table?"

"I hain't seen no bottle," said Bessy, opening her eyes. "What kind o' bottle was it, mum?"

"The bottle I kept my—my toothache mixture in," said Patty, with a lie ready to hand. "It was nearly empty, but I wanted to get it filled again. Be quick and look for it."

Bessy hunted everywhere for the missing bottle, but could not find it. And Patty was forced to relinquish her search for it at last, though not without misgivings that Mr. Jacobi would refuse her the ten pounds if she did not return him his bottle.

More than half-an-hour had elapsed since the administra-

tion of the sleeping-draught. Patty thought that she would go upstairs and take a look at Joan through her peep-hole. She must be asleep by this time.

Curious fact! Joan did not appear to be asleep at all. She was turning restlessly upon her pillow, and sighing now and then. Patty watched her breathlessly. Surely Mr. Jacobi had not been mistaken? Was Joan not going to sleep after all?

There! Now she was quieter. She had not moved for some minutes. Was she sinking into slumber at last? No, that she was not; she was sighing again, and turning restlessly as she had done before. Patty cast a frightened glance at a clock behind her. The time was speeding away, and Seth would soon be there. Could nothing be done to make Joan go to sleep?

She looked again. Joan was lying motionless upon her bed. "I believe she is asleep," said Patty to herself. "I've a good mind to go in now and take the bag."

But even as these thoughts passed through her mind, Joan stirred. She sat up erect, and called out in a firm, clear voice:

"Patty!"

Patty gave a sudden start. Her first impulse was to imagine that Joan had, in some occult way, become aware of her sister-in-law's watchful eye at the hole in the partition, and to answer humbly even from her point of vantage. After that first moment of alarm, however, she scrambled down from the chair on which she had been standing, and stood in the middle of the room, her heart beating violently. And then her name was called again, and she collected herself so far as to respond, and to make her way, tremblingly, into the passage.

Joan appeared at the door of her own room, a tall, white figure, with her magnificent hair falling over her shoulders, and her eyes bright with unusual lustre.

"Patty," she said, "my headache is gone, but I feel as if I should never go to sleep again. I am wide awake. If you like to go to bed, I will dress and sit up for father and Seth. They are sure to be late."

Patty stared at Joan, with guilty, dilated eyes, and did not speak.

"How white you look, Patty!" said her sister-in-law. "You have been too long alone. I will be down directly, and then you can go to bed as soon as you like."

She closed the door as she spoke. Patty stood for a moment transfixed by fright and astonishment, then ran softly downstairs, let herself out of the house, and sped towards the deserted building at the end of the orchard. Jacobi opened the door as soon as he heard her hasty tap.

"What a time you have been!" he said. "What has happened?"

In a few incoherent words she gave him the history of the experiment. He uttered a furious oath and ground his teeth with rage.

"I must try some other way, then," he said, his brow contracting ominously.

"And my ten pounds, Mr. Jacobi," said Patty, nearly crying between vexation, disappointment, and fear. "I'm sure I've earned it, for it wasn't my fault if Joan didn't fall asleep."

"Oh, I dare say you spilt the mixture or spoilt it in some way," said Jacobi, coolly. "I'm not going to pay you when I haven't got what I came for, Mrs. Seth Darenth." Then, seeing that she was on the point of bursting into tears, he added, "There's a sovereign just now at any rate. We'll see about the rest later. Now you had better go home as quickly as you can or Joan will suspect something. I want to get out of this abominable place, too, as soon as possible."

Patty came in from the garden, looking so confused and so anxious that a person must have been blind not to suspect that something was amiss. Joan wondered, but said nothing. She herself felt so restless and feverish that she wandered out into the cool evening air for refreshment. The opiate had only the effect of making her wakeful for the whole night, and leaving her with a slight headache next morning.

Doctor Ambrose met her, as it happened, at the garden-gate, when he paid his daily visit to Geoffrey, and asked what ailed her. She told him that she had spent a wakeful night, and that was all.

"Wakeful nights don't generally leave you with such

pale cheeks," said the doctor, regarding her with some keenness. "What kept you awake?"

"I don't know. I had a headache and went to bed early. I think a cup of tea that I drank must have had something to do with it," said Joan, smiling a little, for one of the doctor's pet theories was based on the evil effects of too much tea and coffee drinking.

"A bad thing—a bad thing," said Doctor Ambrose seriously. "You will ruin your constitution, you know, if you will drink tea late at night, Joan. Now I must go and see my patient, I suppose."

Neither of them had noticed the near approach of a man who had been working in the garden while they talked. He had a dark, sullen expression of countenance, but it softened a little as he touched his cap to Joan. She recognised him at once as Patty's ne'er-do-weel cousin, Joel Price.

"Why, Joel," she said, "I did not know that you were working here. How is your rheumatism?"

"It's better, miss, thankee."

"Did you rub your arm with the stuff I sent you? And did it do you good?"

The man grunted out a sulky assent. Joan moved forward to join the doctor, when she was arrested by a few words from Joel. "Look here," he said, "don't you go for to get Patty into trouble if I tells you something."

"No," said Joan. "You may trust me. What is it?"

"You was always kind to me," Joel went on, "and I don't like to see tricks played you. It was Patty as kept you awake. She put some stuff into your tea from a little bottle—I see her from the window, and then she nodded to herself and said, 'That'll make her sleep now.' Here's the bottle that she poured it out of. I got it while she went upstairs with your tea. She was joking belike. She's played me many a trick afore now, and I thought I'd be even with her for once."

"Thank you, Joel," said Joan, taking the bottle from the man's hand, quietly. "Don't say anything about it."

"Not I. You won't get her into trouble for it neither, will you?"

"Certainly not. I am much obliged to you."

Joan walked down the path and joined the doctor at the other end of the garden.

"Well," he said, in a tone, half joking, half friendly, in which he sometimes accosted her, "you look as if you had seen a ghost. What have you got there?"

"Could you tell me what has been inside that bottle, Doctor Ambrose?" she said.

The doctor took it from her hand and looked at it suspiciously. "I might be able to tell you to-morrow," he said. "Shall I take it home with me and see?"

"Yes, please. But you must promise not to say anything about it to anybody."

The doctor promised, wrapped the bottle in paper, and departed with it in his pocket. Joan awaited the result of his examination with some anxiety.

But when the morrow came Doctor Ambrose's usual visit was omitted. On the following day, his assistant appeared in his place, with the news that the old doctor had been taken suddenly ill, and had been for the last four and twenty hours utterly incapable of movement or of speech.

CHAPTER XXXV

SUCCESS

WHEN Nigel Tremaine once more visited Number 5, John Street, he was received by Madame Vallor alone.

"I want to speak to you," she said. "I want to draw your attention to two very important facts. One is the fact that Miss Vanborough will be of age next week; the other, that she is now so much better that her entire recovery is a mere matter of time."

"Yes."

"We are in constant danger, as you yourself say; danger of discovery on all sides, and if we are discovered, Clarice will be put into the hands of her father and brother. I might, of course, come forward, and prevent her marriage with Constantine Jacobi; but, as I have explained to

you, I do not want to put myself again within my husband's reach. At the same time, I think that we had better make the concealment as short as possible."

"So I think," said Nigel, a slight flush crossing his fair, pale face. "I have already been considering a way out of the difficulty. One that you suggested some time ago."

"Suggest it yourself now," she said.

"When Clarice can answer me the question I mean to put to her one day, I shall do more than suggest it," he answered, with a sudden flash of his keen, blue eyes.

"I think," said Madame Vallor, "you will find that Clarice can answer any questions you may ask her—now."

He said nothing for some minutes. He seemed to be deeply engaged in studying the intricacies of the pattern of the carpet. Madame Vallor rose quietly and went into the other room.

In another moment the door opened, and Clarice appeared upon the threshold.

"Nigel," she said, softly.

And as Nigel started forward to meet her, she blushed and gave him her hand, instead of lifting up her face to be kissed, in the fraternal fashion which had lately obtained between them. Nigel was startled by the change.

"Clarice," he said, enfolding her slender hand in both his, "what is the matter? Is anything wrong?"

"Oh, no," she answered.

"What is it, then? Won't you kiss me as you generally do?"

She raised her face to his, and then he was conscious that a change had passed over it during the week which had elapsed since he saw her last. It was no longer a pale and soulless mask; it was the soft, sweet, maidenly face, with its serious dark eyes and occasional wild-rose tinting, which had charmed him in the days of old. Every time he saw her of late she had grown more like herself; now it seemed as if the greatest change of all had come. Clarice remembered, and Clarice loved.

"What is it, my darling?" he said, drawing her close to him with his arm.

"Nigel," she whispered, "I do not know what I have

been thinking of lately. It seems as if some long, bad dream had come between you and me. What is it?"

"It has been like a bad dream, certainly," said Nigel, quietly. "You have been ill, darling, that is all. You are stronger and better now."

"Yes, I am better. But even now, Nigel, I get so confused at times—I don't know where I am or what I am doing—and if she were not so kind—Mrs. Danvers—Aunt Mary—why do I call her Aunt Mary——?" She stopped, and the troubled, puzzled look came again to her face, the look which Nigel did not like to see.

"Do you trust me, Clarice?" he asked her.

"Trust you, Nigel? With all my heart."

"Then will you remember, when you see and hear things that puzzle you, that I know all about it, and that everything will come right in the end? Don't forget it, my darling. 'Nigel knows all about it, and everything will come right at last.' Say that to yourself, will you?"

She raised her eyes to his with a tranquil, contented look. "I will remember, Nigel," she said. "I am sure I shall remember that."

Presently Nigel spoke again.

"Your birthday comes next week, Clarice. You will be twenty-one."

"Yes," she said. "I had forgotten."

"At twenty-one you are your own mistress. And when you are your own mistress, Clarice, I want you to consider whether you can make up your mind to give yourself to me."

He spoke lightly and easily, for he did not want to alarm her by his proposal, but she received it in a way that astonished him. She lifted her head from his shoulder and repeated the word "Whether!" in a tone that savoured almost of offence. Nigel was delighted.

"Well," he said, "alter the word 'whether' into 'when,' shall we? When will you give yourself to me, my Clarice?"

She was silent for a little space; but when he looked at her he found that tears and smiles were contending for the mastery in her beautiful face, and covering it with the loveliest rose-tints of returning happiness and health.

"Oh, Nigel," she said, at length, "I am so weak and foolish that I do not think I am worth having at all. But if you want me—I will do exactly what you like."

And then, as if afraid that she had said too much, she broke from his encircling arms and hid herself in the next room, whence Madame Vallor presently emerged with a faint smile upon her lips, and found Nigel walking up and down the room at a very rapid pace.

He turned to meet her as she entered, and held out his hand.

"We have succeeded," he said; and, though he spoke calmly, he could not keep the exultant sparkle out of his eyes nor the glow of triumph from his face.

"You have asked your question?" said Madame Vallor, withdrawing her hand from his close and friendly grasp and seating herself at her work.

"I have asked and been answered. She will be twenty-one on Sunday, will she? Then before the end of that week she shall be my wife."

"I am glad of that," she said, without looking at him. "I advised that course long ago, Mr. Tremaine. You must not be alarmed if you find her mind still apt to be weak and confused sometimes. You must keep her very tranquil, for any excitement throws her back at once. She grows stronger and better, on the whole, however, every day."

"I am not afraid," Nigel answered.

"And—another thing, Mr. Tremaine. Bring Mrs. Tremaine, your mother, to the wedding. Quiet as it may be, you must have witnesses of undoubted good faith; your mother and your sister, or some well-known and intimate friend."

Nigel consented cheerfully. He stayed some hours longer, and saw Clarice again in the course of the evening. It was while they were quietly, but very contentedly, talking to one another, that the servant brought in a letter for "Mrs. Wilson." Madame Vallor recognised the handwriting as that of her old acquaintance, Madame St. Pierre, of East Street. She turned away from her companions and tore open the envelope. It contained a letter from Joan. She read it, and her cheek paled as

she read. The attention of the young people was drawn to her at last. She sank into a chair, trembling violently and looking as though she were about to faint.

Nigel summoned old Martha, who applied some restoratives, and Madame Vallor soon began to look less ghastly.

"Read! read!" she said to Nigel, thrusting the letter into his hands. Nigel read, and Clarice, almost unobserved, leaned against him and read too; for the letter was from Joan.

"You say you once knew Mr. Jacobi," Joan wrote, in a strain of despondency very unusual with her. "I wish you could tell me anything good of him, for I distrust him, and have reason to distrust him more than words can say. And yet he is always here—trying to see Captain Vanborough—trying to get me out of his room—trying to give him medicine. Can you tell me whether he is to be trusted or not? Does he hate Captain Vanborough? Or is it only my fancy that he is trying to injure him?"

"My poor Joan!" Madame Vallor was saying. "And poor Geoffrey too! What will become of them if they have fallen into the hands of that wicked man?"

Meanwhile, Clarice's face had grown pale; her eyes had assumed a startled, terrified expression.

"What does it all mean?" she said. "Where is Geoffrey, then? And who is Mr. Jacobi? Oh, I remember—I begin to remember now! Nigel, Nigel, save me! You will not surely let them take me away from you again!"

"My darling, you are safe with me," cried Nigel, becoming conscious of his carelessness in allowing the events of the past to be so suddenly recalled to Clarice's remembrance.

"Try to think of what I told you. I know all about it; I am taking care of you."

"I remember that you told me to trust you, Nigel, and I do. But I want to know why Joan wrote about Geoffrey. Is Geoffrey in England?"

Madame Vallor answered for Nigel. "Geoffrey is in England," she said, "but he has been ill, and Joan is nursing him."

"Oh, poor Geoffrey! I did not know he had been ill,"

said Clarice, musingly. Then, with a slight smile : " He will be glad to have Joan to nurse him."

Nigel looked at her with a sudden flash of comprehension and sympathy. She was remembering her old life, then, and she knew.

" What has been the matter with him ? " she asked next. " Has he been ill long ? "

" It was an accident," said Nigel, gently. " An accident on the railway, love. We hope he—will soon be—better." But he could not utter the sentence without hesitation.

" And my father ? and Gilbert ? Are they well ? "

" Fairly well, I believe," said Nigel.

" Nothing has happened to them ? Papa is at Charnwood Manor, and Gilbert in London ? "

" Gilbert and his wife have gone to visit your father at Charnwood."

" Then why am I here ? "

It was the most simple and natural question in the world, and yet one that Madame Vallor and Nigel Tremaine found difficult to answer. Nigel consulted Madame Vallor with his eyes ; Clarice caught the glance and was annoyed by it.

" Why do you look at each other like that ? " she said, with some petulance. " You need not be afraid of telling me. I only want to know the truth. Forgive me, Nigel, if I speak angrily. It is so hard to live in the midst of secrets and be told nothing. I cannot bear it." The tears shone in her eyes, the colour rushed into her cheeks, but she struggled to control herself. " Do as you think best, Nigel," she said, softly. " I will trust you."

Madame Vallor rose abruptly from her chair and went to the door. Here she turned round and addressed two words to Tremaine. " Tell her ! " she said, sharply. Then she entered the next room and shut the door.

" Yes," said Clarice, turning round and looking him in the face, " tell me."

He made her sit down first upon a sofa, then sat down beside her and took her hand in his. He had a difficult task before him. He did not mean to tell her everything, and yet he knew that he must tell her sufficient to set her mind at rest.

"Do you remember anything about your leaving Charnwood?" he began.

"I have had bad dreams," she said. "I don't know which were true and which were false; help me to remember."

"Do you remember that your father wished you to marry his secretary—a man whom you did not love—instead of me?"

"Yes," she said, faintly, "I thought so."

"My darling, do not tremble so; the danger is over now. I discovered, fortunately, that this man's wife was still living, and I told your father of my discovery. But by that time you had grown so ill that we thought a complete change of air and scene would be good for you, so Mrs. Danvers, your companion, and I brought you up to London, and you have remained here—with old Martha, from Beechfield, to wait upon you—for the last few weeks. Now do you understand?"

The truth, softened in this way, was not very terrible to Clarice's ears. Her mind was as yet hardly strong enough to distinguish the weak points in Nigel's story, nor to inquire into the reasons for his mode of action. He waited a little, and saw the frightened look disappear from her eyes and the colour return to her lips. Then he continued, cautiously:

"When we are married we will go and see Geoffrey and your father, if you like. Shall it be next week, Clarice?"

"If you like," she said, playing nervously with the folds of her dress. "Will—he—you know whom I mean—would he be there?"

"Not when you go," said Nigel, a trifle sternly. "I will take care of that."

She reflected awhile, and then said:

"But what is he doing to Joan and Geoffrey?"

He was again astonished by her returning powers of memory.

"We do not know," he answered. "Geoffrey is at the Hillside Farm, and Joan is nursing him there. Why Jacobi should trouble them I cannot tell."

"Why is not Geoffrey at home?"

"Because, darling, your father is angry with him. Don't you remember that Geoffrey had to go away from England on account of some money difficulties—some papers——"

"Papers?" she said, putting her hand to her forehead. "Don't tell me any more; I can't understand; I can't remember. Were those the papers that I took to Joan?"

"Papers that you took to Joan? What do you mean, dear?"

"Where is Mrs. Danvers? She would help me," said Clarice, gazing round her with a piteous look. "Please call her."

Nigel knocked hastily at the door and summoned Madame Vallor. It was to her that Clarice turned instinctively for aid.

"You know," she said, "that *he* told me that those papers had been Geoffrey's ruin—that he had Geoffrey in his power."

"Yes. I know. The papers in your father's desk."

"I took them out," said the girl, hesitatingly, yet with a clearer look upon her face, as if the light of memory were momentarily growing brighter. "I took them out of the desk. What did I do with them?"

Madame Vallor came a step nearer.

"You took out of the desk those papers relating to Geoffrey?" she said, eagerly. "The papers that would have disgraced him in the world's eyes, the evidence against him?"

"Did I do wrong?" said Clarice, faltering.

"No, my darling, no," said Nigel. "You did right. But what then became of the papers?"

"Wait a moment," said Madame Vallor, lifting a warning finger. "You took them out of the desk one night when you saw Constantine Jacobi alone in your father's study. He had taken opium, and fell asleep before your eyes. He had told you the story of your brother's crime; and you were anxious not to leave the proofs of it in his hands. Was this not so?"

"Yes, yes," said Clarice, eagerly. "Go on. I took the papers, and then—what did I do?"

"You left the house," said Madame Vallor, steadily.

"You left Charnwood Manor in the middle of the night, and you made your way to the Darenths' farm. Joan took you in; Joan cared for you. You had the papers in your hand——"

"No," Clarice interrupted her. "I gave the papers to Joan, and told her to hide them. She promised; but I remember nothing more."

Suddenly her excitement overcame her. She turned round to Nigel with a quick movement, as if seeking for protection, and burst into a passion of tears. They dared not ask her anything more. Some hours of rest and quiet were needed before she would be in a fit state to hold further conversation upon a subject which affected her so painfully. But she had said enough to throw a new light upon the matter.

"Jacobi has obtained information as to the whereabouts of these papers, I suppose," said Nigel to Madame Vallor.

"If so," she said slowly, "I tremble for Joan."

Then they began to consider what had better be done. To write to Joan would not be sufficient, Madame Vallor thought; she ought, if possible, to be relieved of the charge of the papers. But to whom would she give them except to Clarice or to Geoffrey himself? Maddalena, knowing the depth of Joan's affection for Geoffrey, spoke with decision upon this point. If Joan thought that she was doing Geoffrey a service by concealing these papers, she would conceal them at any cost.

"The best plan would be for you to go to her, Mr. Tremaine, and get the papers," said Madame Vallor, at last, "and put her on her guard."

"Do you think she would give them to me?" said Nigel, doubtfully.

"I think she would. Tell her you know where Clarice is, and that Clarice wants her to give them to you."

"Still, Jacobi will believe that she has them."

Madame Vallor deliberated for a few minutes. "Doctor Burnett Lynn is your friend, is he not?" she asked, abruptly.

"Yes."

"Take him into your confidence. Invite him to your house. Tell him that you fancy that Jacobi wants to

try his drugs upon Geoffrey. All the instincts of his profession, as well as the claims of friendship, will be enlisted on Geoffrey's behalf. Set him to baffle Jacobi. If foul play is going on he will be the first to discover it. I will tell Joan to trust him."

"Will he do it?" said Nigel, again doubtful.

"Oh, yes," said Madame Vallor, "he will do it."

Nigel saw no other means of interference that were likely to be of any avail, so long as Madame Vallor herself absolutely refused to come forward and identify Jacobi as her husband, and he accordingly acted on her advice. On the following day he sought out Burnett Lynn, of whom he had seen little or nothing during the last few weeks, and invited him to Beechfield.

The doctor replied that he was sorry to refuse, but that he had an engagement.

"If you could throw over your engagement you might do Vanborough a service," said Tremaine.

"Geoffrey Vanborough?"

Nigel nodded. "Look here," he said, "old Doctor Ambrose is ill, and there is nobody looking after Geoffrey but that young whipper-snapper of an assistant of his."

"My dear fellow, I can't interfere," said Burnett Lynn, impetuously.

"I know you can't, openly."

"Nor secretly, either."

"Well, if you won't do it secretly somebody else will," said Nigel, lighting a cigar with a semblance of great indifference. "That man Jacobi is in and out of the house all day and every day, and Joan Darenth is afraid of his tampering with the patient."

"By Jove!" said Burnett Lynn, "and a very likely thing for him to do, too," he added.

"You might, at least, run down and look at him."

"Yes, I might. Miss Darenth spoke to you, I suppose?"

"No, I spoke to Miss Darenth."

He had been down to Charnwood on the previous afternoon, and had succeeded in gaining possession of the papers. Joan had acknowledged that they would be safer with him than with her, although she did not tell him the story of that cup of tea which Patty had administered

only a few days before. She confessed, however, to a feeling of nervousness, with which she had been unacquainted until lately, at seeing Jacobi so constantly about the premises. Doctor Ambrose was still unable to leave his bed, and the young assistant saw no harm in consulting with Mr. Jacobi—a man of undoubted medical skill and a trusted friend of Sir Wilfred's—upon any knotty point. Joan had been glad to hear that a doctor in whom Maddalena and Mr. Tremaine both had confidence would shortly be in the neighbourhood.

"So," Nigel continued, coolly, "she said she would be glad to see you."

"Oh, you told her I was coming?"

"I thought you would not refuse."

"In plain words, what do you think Jacobi wants to do?"

"He has a spite against Geoffrey," said Nigel. "He is the sort of man who would do anything to get an enemy out of his way. How soon can you come down? To-day? I shall be running down myself this evening, for a few days. I told my mother that I might possibly bring you down. She is very anxious to make your acquaintance."

Burnett Lynn hesitated no longer. He packed his portmanteau, and left London with Nigel by the evening train.

On the following morning the two friends went together to the farm. Here they saw Geoffrey, who, during all these five months, had lain in the same strange state of insensibility upon his bed, and here Burnett Lynn had a long talk with Joan. He speedily won her confidence, and she told him more concerning her fears of Jacobi, and the grounds upon which they were founded, than she had yet been able to confide to anyone else. Burnett Lynn looked very grave when he rejoined his friend.

"Tremaine," he said, "who is responsible for Vanborough's comfort and security?"

"Responsible? What do you mean? The Darenths, at present, I suppose?"

"Who has authority to remove him from the care of the Darenths?"

"I don't know. I should say I have as much authority as anybody."

"Then why the devil don't you use it?" Burnett Lynn would sometimes use strong expressions when he was angry, and at present his face was a very angry one. "Why upon earth haven't you moved him from that place long ago?"

"Because I thought he was doing well there; because I was told he could not be moved," said Tremaine, looking dark in his turn. "What's wrong?"

"Well, if you don't remove him, there'll be murder in that house before very long. If it wasn't for that girl, Joan Darenth, who is worth her weight in gold, Geoffrey Vanborough would be dead and buried by this time. Of that I am fully convinced."

"Tell me exactly what you mean."

"Well, to begin with, Jacobi did his best to drug her a little more than a week ago. She does not say so, but she says that that little sister-in-law of hers brought her some tea into which, as she has since been informed, the contents of a tiny glass bottle had been emptied. She had given the bottle to Ambrose, just before he fell ill, to be examined, so she could not show it to me, but she described it as rather curious in colour—of a bluish-green tint—and with the name of a town stamped upon it. The town of Buenos Ayres. Now, does that look as if Jacobi had had a hand in it, or does it not?"

"Did she drink the stuff?"

"Yes, but it made her desperately wide awake. A narcotic will do that sometimes, you know. Since that time she has either been very careful what she ate and drank, or else no more attempts have been made. Why Jacobi should have tried to drug her on a night when she was not sitting up with Vanborough I cannot understand. If she had been nursing him I should see the motive—he might want to get at Geoffrey quietly—but when she was not going near him——"

He stopped to ruminate, and was struck by Nigel's silence.

"Do you see the motive?" he said, sharply.

"I can guess. Joan had some papers relating to Geoffrey's affairs of which Jacobi wanted to get hold."

"Did Joan tell you that?"

"No."

"I hate your confounded mysteries," said Burnett Lynn, viciously. "I wish I had not come down. I wish I was in South America again."

"Well—what else has Jacobi been doing?"

The doctor resumed his tale without further comment.

"He has been trying all he knew to get into Vanborough's room. Came in once with young Smiles, Ambrose's assistant, and wanted to change his medicine. Miss Darenth made no objection, but she watched Jacobi closely, and she is certain that she saw him shake a white powder into the milk with which, you know, they keep poor Geoffrey alive. She gave it to a cat afterwards."

"Well?" said Nigel, as Burnett Lynn paused.

"In an hour the animal was as dead as a doornail. Of course, I cannot tell whether it did not die from natural causes, or whether Joan herself may not have been deceived by an excited fancy. But since that time she has kept close watch and ward. She has sat up every night, and has scarcely left his room. Jacobi prowls about the place 'like a wild beast,' she says, 'in search of prey.'"

"But surely the fellow—scoundrel as he is—would not be foolhardy enough to poison Geoffrey in a manner which would rouse everybody's suspicions?"

"That is what I think. And that is why I am disposed to look on the white powder business as a figment of Miss Joan's imagination. Still—Jacobi might want to secure his revenge at any price. You may be pretty sure that he has provided the means of escape for himself so long as he gets two or three hours' start."

"Could Geoffrey be moved to Beechfield without injury?"

"I think so. You would like him to-day?"

"Certainly."

"Then we had better turn back to the farm. I would send a note to your mother at once, if I were you. Can we get a carriage and horses at the inn?"

"Is it not a risk to move him without an invalid carriage or bed, or something of that kind?"

"Why?"

"Because I have been thinking that if we could manage

to watch Geoffrey ourselves for a day or two, in company with Joan, we might have a chance of catching that villain at his work."

"I would give a good deal to do that," said Burnett Lynn.

"And so would I."

They had both halted in the road, and now stood silent for a minute or two.

"I'll tell you what we will do," said Burnett Lynn, at last. "Go and consult Joan; I expect that her wits are as sharp as yours or mine."

"Sharper," said Nigel to himself, "when Geoffrey Vanborough is concerned, I fancy."

But this he did not say aloud.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE PAPER IN THE GUN-ROOM

MERLE and Gilbert were still at Charnwood Manor. Sir Wilfred had expressed great reluctance to part with his daughter-in-law when there had been some talk of her going back to London; and it was finally decided that she should give up the rest of the season and remain at Charnwood, while Gilbert might go backwards and forwards to London as inclination prompted, or the exigencies of picture exhibitions required. Gilbert, however, did not avail himself much of the liberty granted him. He had fallen into a dejected and moody state of mind, and neglected his painting almost entirely.

The conditions of life at Charnwood were perhaps harmfully depressing to him. His father was very feeble; Clarice was absent—lost, as it seemed, for ever; Geoffrey lay, a mile off, between life and death. Jacobi was always near at hand, although he did not live in the house; and the allusions which he chose to make sometimes to Gilbert's secret, nearly drove the young man wild with rage and fear. No wonder, then, that he looked pale and worn, that his sleep was broken, and that the symptoms of his malady steadily increased.

Jacobi had waited for some time before making known to Sir Wilfred the loss of the papers relating to Geoffrey and the Hospital. He dared not risk the avowal that he had himself discovered their disappearance; he merely mentioned them one day in an apparently careless manner, and suggested that it would be well for Sir Wilfred to assure himself of their safety. The old baronet grew anxious at once. He produced his keys, and begged Jacobi to open his desk for him. The spring of the private drawer was touched, it flew open, but the papers were not there.

Sir Wilfred's agitation on discovering the theft was shared by Gilbert, upon whom, however, Jacobi's well-acted surprise and sympathy did not produce the effect which they seemed calculated to produce.

He did not mention to Sir Wilfred his suspicion—nay, his certainty—that Joan Darenth had possession of the papers. In fact, his plans for getting them, through Patty's help, into his own hands, had just received an unexpected check. Patty informed him that the bag had disappeared from Joan's neck, and that she seemed to have no papers of any kind about her.

Was it possible, he asked himself, that he was losing nerve and resolution? He was not the man he used to be. He had to guard himself against frightful attacks of nervous pain by large doses of opium.

Again and again it occurred to him that he had better abandon all hope of allying himself with the Vanboroughs, and make good his flight to America before old stories of his former life could be proved against him. Two causes of delay remained. He wanted to find Clarice Vanborough, and he wanted to revenge himself upon Nigel Tremaine and Geoffrey. The latter motive was the stronger one. His hatred of these two men was beginning to pass all bounds.

Gilbert's harassed and agitated look did not escape his wife's notice. She asked him gently whether he was troubled by any new source of vexation. He answered readily.

"Yes, my father has lost some important papers. We think they must be stolen."

"Stolen!" said Merle, aghast. "But who would steal them?"

"That is just what we cannot tell, of course."

"Is it possible that they have been misplaced?"

"No; they were in my father's desk. Anyone who misplaced them must have done so knowingly."

"It is a curious thing," said Merle, after a short pause, "that so many papers disappear, and nobody knows anything about them, especially in this house."

"Why in this house?"

"I don't know, but I remember several instances. Clarice lost papers a great many times when I was here before; and, by-the-bye, Gilbert, you told me once that you lost an important paper here yourself."

"I?" said Gilbert, flushing nervously. "What paper?"

"I don't remember. A letter, I think."

Then Merle remembered that the letter had been from Geoffrey, and was silent. A few words only had escaped Gilbert's lips on the subject of the farewell letter that Geoffrey had written to him when he left England, but from these few words Merle knew that this letter had been lost. Gilbert did not like the reminder. It set him wandering about the house, searching the rooms in an aimless, ineffective manner, tiring himself out with useless errands to places where he imagined papers might be kept. There were few things that he regretted so much as the loss of Geoffrey's letter.

Merle observed his restlessness with anxiety. She ventured to ask, one day, whether he was seeking for the documents that Sir Wilfred had lost or for Geoffrey's letter, and offered to join in the search, but was repulsed with a few irritable words concerning her "officiousness." Poor Merle was well used by this time to irritable and angry words from Gilbert, but these were uttered with peculiar bitterness. She did not dare to reopen the subject, but it dwelt in her memory, and she even spent a little time now and then in glancing through files of papers and piles of letters, with the hope that she might at least discover the letter from Geoffrey that seemed of so great importance in her husband's eyes.

' It was a glorious summer day in June. Gilbert and his father had driven out together. She had two hours before her, and hardly knew how to occupy them. At last she remembered that she had left a basket of flowers in the hall, and determined to give herself to the task of arranging them. And for this purpose she told one of the servants to bring some water, a tray, and several vases into the gun-room, which was now little used except by Merle herself as a place wherein she transacted odd bits of business concerning the village people and the parish.

Her vases did not take long to arrange. She sent them away and prepared to return to the drawing-room, but something in the aspect of the room delayed her. It had a slightly disordered look, as if someone who had recently occupied it had pulled every article of furniture out of its place and forgotten to put it back again. Merle knew that her husband had been there that morning, and suspected that he had been seeking for the missing paper. She sighed a little as she began to put various smaller articles back into their places.

She came at last to a letter-rack stuffed full of papers. These had evidently been examined and thrust back carelessly; she straightened and refolded several of the papers. But the nail on which the letter-rack hung had been loosened; it gave way suddenly, and the letter-rack and papers came with a crash to the floor.

Merle went down on her knees to collect the scattered papers. They had all fallen loose—not one was left in the letter-rack itself. Ah, yes, one remained; one that had been slipped behind the others, and had caught upon a broken bit of wood. It would have escaped notice altogether if the letter-rack had not fallen to the floor.

Merle took out this paper and straightened it. And then her eyes fell upon the writing, Geoffrey's hand. Was this the letter of which Gilbert was in search? There was a date; yes, it was the date of the day before the one on which Geoffrey had sailed. Her eyes fell involuntarily upon the first few lines. She was in doubt as to whom it was addressed, for no name was given at the beginning. It opened thus abruptly:

"I do not wish to reproach you. If you had trusted me, all might have been well. But you threw the burden of disgrace on my shoulders, and I had either to bear it or expose you. You knew that I would not do that.

"I will not betray you, so long as you lead an honourable, upright life. But, for God's sake, take warning. Let this be your last act of dishonesty, at least. If I have sacrificed everything for you, don't let the sacrifice be in vain. We cannot see each other; but before I go I must write these few words. I have done my best for you, Gilbert. I can do nothing more."

The paper was signed merely with initials—"G. V." No address was given.

Merle felt suddenly sick and cold. She sat down quietly and tried to think, but her mind was in a whirl of doubt and perplexity. What was the full bearing of Geoffrey's letter? Was it possible that it had been addressed to Gilbert?

She turned the sheet of paper over as it lay upon her knee. Yes, there was the name plainly written on the back of the letter—"Gilbert Vanborough, Esquire."

She read it through once more, although her hands shook and her eyes were growing dim. She had no need to read it again. For the rest of her life the words of that letter were indelibly impressed upon her brain.

Then she rose up with a flash of impetuous indignation. The accusation had startled her for a moment, but of course it could not be true. Geoffrey was trying to throw the blame of his own wrong-doing upon Gilbert. And that was why Gilbert had shrunk from the mention of Geoffrey's name, and refused to write to him or see him. This was surely the case—was it not?

Little by little a terrible dread stole into Merle's heart. There was another quite possible interpretation of that letter and of Gilbert's conduct.

Her mind travelled back to the earliest days of her married life, two years before. She remembered that Gilbert had been taken ill about the time of Sir Wilfred's discovery of the embezzlement of his subscription to the Hospital. The details of that first serious attack of illness

came back to her with great clearness. Gilbert's sick fancy, as she had then considered it, of asking Geoffrey's forgiveness for some unknown wrong that had been done him, his uneasiness of mind throughout the time intervening between the last interview and Geoffrey's departure, his subsequent depression and remorse—all these things recurred to her with new and startling significance. She had thought his self-depreciation exaggerated; in the light of this accusation she saw that what she had deemed a morbidly low estimate of himself was perhaps only a too terribly true one. Could it be possible that she had lived with him for days and months, and even years, and that he had told her nothing? A flood of unutterable desolation bowed her soul to the very dust. She had never known him aright; her trust had been misplaced, her admiration thrown away, her love wasted. A man who could see his brother suffering in his stead, and refuse to say a word to clear him from unjust suspicion and punishment—was this the man who had been the first love of her youth, the idolised husband of the last two years? The thought seemed to degrade her in her own eyes as much as it degraded him.

How the next hour passed she knew not. She was struggling with cold fear, sick depression, hot indignation, by turns. She sat with her hands clasped tightly before her over the letter; her face pale, her eyes somewhat dilated but tearless, her figure slightly bent. And it was thus that Gilbert found her when he returned from his drive at half-past five o'clock, and after looking for her in vain in her usual haunts, opened the gun-room door in search of her.

"Why are you here?" he began, fretfully. "I have been looking for you everywhere. My father——"

And then he stopped short, for he had seen her face.

She did not say anything; she scarcely even moved; but his eyes fell instinctively upon the paper which she held, as if he knew that the secret of her distress lay there.

With a face as pale as her own, he snatched the paper from her nerveless fingers and glanced at it. She did not try to prevent his doing so; she hardly knew whether she wished to prevent it or not, but she felt that when he

had seen the paper, and she had once looked into his eyes, she should know if he were innocent or guilty. And yet she did not dare to look. She heard the one broken exclamation that fell from his lips; she saw that he staggered and put one hand against the wall in order to support himself; and then she knew the worst. He had no denial ready; he proffered no word of justification or of explanation.

"My God!" he said, with something between a sob and a groan, and that was all. Then he turned away and leaned on the mantelpiece, hiding his face in his hands. For some minutes neither of them spoke.

"Merle!" he said, "speak to me. Say something—for pity's sake."

There was a short pause. "What shall I say?" she then asked in a low tone.

He made no answer.

Presently she rose, came to him, and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Gilbert," she said, in a voice which trembled in spite of her effort to make it calm, "is it—can it be—true?"

He winced at the question. It seemed to him impossible to answer. But perhaps his silence told her all she wanted to know. She let her hand fall from his arm and sighed. Her voice was steady, but very low, when she spoke again.

"Gilbert," she said, gently, "you must tell me everything now."

"I can't tell you," he groaned. "It is too bad a story. I can't tell it you."

She waited a little before she said, "Is there anything worse than what I know already?"

He lifted his haggard face from his hands and looked at her.

"What do you know?" he said, hoarsely. "What did this—this letter—tell you?"

"It told me that Geoffrey was guiltless. That you—you—that it was you who——"

She broke down suddenly at this point. She turned away from him and grasped at the back of a chair with both hands.

"Oh, Gilbert," she said, with a catch in her voice which gave her words an indescribably pathetic sound, "my heart is breaking. I loved you so!"

Gilbert changed his position and glanced at her furtively. She stood like a statue, her hands still grasping the chair, her face pale, with tears dropping unheeded from her eyes. Gilbert misunderstood her emotion. It seemed to him that she was in a soft and tender mood; she had not reproached him; she would surely soon forgive him all. He made a step towards her; he tried to put his arm round her.

"Merle," he said, softly, "you do not know how I have suffered. I have been punished. I have been the most miserable man on earth."

She drew back from his touch. Her tears were staunched at once, as though the flame of the hot colour that overspread her face dried them.

"You talk of misery and punishment," she said, "while Geoffrey is banished from his father's house—for your sake!"

"I cannot help it," he said, weakly and sullenly. "He did it. He might have told. He——"

"Is it my husband who says these things to me?" said Merle, with curious intensity of feeling in her low voice. "Is this the man whom I once thought the best and noblest in the world? Do you dare to throw the blame of your own cowardice upon your brother?"

She stopped short as though she would not utter the words that hovered upon her lips. Her face was haughty in its look of concentrated indignation.

Gilbert sank down upon a chair and again bowed his head upon his hands. "True enough," he muttered, with a sort of remorseful bitterness. "I am a coward; go on. It only remains for you to call me a liar and a thief; I am both, I suppose. There is nothing too bad for you to say of me. I have let Geoffrey bear the blame. I sacrificed Clarice to Jacobi, because he knew the truth, and I was afraid of his telling you. I think I could have borne anything, Merle, if it had not been for you. But to drag you down with me——"

"Oh," said Merle, with a ring of despairing scorn in

her voice, "you do not see, then, that you have dragged me down to far greater depths by concealing the truth than by bravely bearing a punishment which I could have borne with you. This is far, far worse."

"Do you mean," said Gilbert, in almost a startled tone, "that you might have—perhaps—forgiven me, if I had cleared Geoffrey at the beginning?"

"I am sure I should."

"If I had told the truth—you——"

He hesitated. She said, "Yes," simply, knowing what he meant.

"And now——?"

Merle turned away her face and did not speak.

"Now?" he repeated. "Merle, Merle, don't tell me that it is too late! Don't say that you will give me up—that you will leave me. Bear with me a little longer. I do not think"—and a shudder ran through his whole frame—"I do not think that it will be—for long."

His words were broken by short sobbing breaths, which warned her that this agitation was harmful to him. As to his last words, they hardly moved her. A feeling of profound discouragement and doubt had seized her with regard to him. She could not tell whether he were sincere or not. But, at any rate, he must be calmed. She answered, gently, if a little coldly:

"I will not leave you, Gilbert. I never thought of doing so. Do not distress yourself in that way. Let us simply think of what ought to be done next."

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE NIGHT WATCH

NIGEL had gone to London "on urgent business." He had promised to be back early in the afternoon, and in the meantime he had committed the charge of watching over Geoffrey to Burnett Lynn.

Neither of them was satisfied with the state of things at the Hillside Farm. Joan was perplexed and troubled

by the difficulties of her position. She could not consult Doctor Ambrose; she distrusted and disliked the young man who had taken his place; and she was prevented by her father and brother from refusing, as she would have liked to refuse, to meet Jacobi, and even at times to see him in Geoffrey's room. Her anxiety about him became too great at last to allow her to sleep, even when she knew that old Anthony was watching beside him; and Burnett Lynn's experienced eye detected in her the signs of some overstrain of the nerves, which made him the more desirous to place Geoffrey in other hands. He saw that she nursed him with the tenderest care; but he also saw that the nights of sleeplessness to which she confessed were acting prejudicially upon her constitution, and he half suspected that Jacobi and Patty were, between them, administering some potion which should tend to unnerve and depress her.

On the Saturday and Sunday nights following Burnett Lynn's arrival at Charnwood, he and Nigel had shared between them the task of sitting up with Geoffrey, instead of deputing that office to Anthony or Joan. But it had been intimated pretty freely that Reuben Darenth and his son resented the interference, as they named it, of Mr. Tremaine and the new doctor with their arrangements for Captain Vanborough's comfort; and Burnett Lynn was somewhat doubtful as to what his reception might be when he arrived at the farmhouse unaccompanied by Nigel, especially at that comparatively late hour.

It was as he expected—the household seemed to have retired for the night. He knocked twice, hoping that Joan would hear him and come down, and blaming himself for his folly in not ascertaining the hour before he set off for the farmhouse. The night was dark, and a chilly, drizzling rain was falling. He stood in the porch and waited for some time, thinking that he heard sounds within the house; but, as no one came to open the door, he knocked again—for the third time. Then came the sound of footsteps, the turning of a key, and the opening of a door.

It was opened by a man whom Burnett Lynn did not know—a dark-faced man with a hang-dog expression and

a sullen brow—no other, indeed, than Mrs. Seth Darenth's cousin, Joel.

"What are you coming here at this time o' night for?" was his greeting. "You can't want aught this side o' to-morrow morning."

"Come, let me pass," said Burnett Lynn, cheerfully. "I'm the doctor, you know. I must see the gentleman upstairs. I'm a friend of Miss Darenth's."

"A friend of Joan's, are you?" Joel deliberately struck a match, and held the light up to the doctor's face, as if to ascertain the truth of this statement before he went on. "Ay, I knows you now. I thought it was that there Mr. Jacobs that Joan said I was to keep out. Joan's a bit nervous to-night; that's why I'm here. Come in, sir. If anything's going to go wrong, it's just as well that you should be here as well as me."

"Why do you think things are going wrong?"

"I can't truly say. There's been comings and goings that they thought I didn't know of, but I did. And I said to myself that I'd sit up here in the kitchen to-night and see what happened. If anybody tries to get in they'll do it this side o' the house."

"Why should anyone try to get in?"

Joel shook his head. Evidently he could hardly give a reason for his suspicions, but that his suspicions had been excited was in itself a remarkable fact, and one by which Dr. Burnett Lynn was rendered seriously uneasy. He wanted to go at once to Geoffrey's room, but was earnestly besought by Joel to wait for another half-hour, when Joan was coming downstairs for a glass of milk from the dairy.

"If we go up now," he said, "my cousin Patty will be peering about, and will make a to-do, sure enough; but if we wait a bit she'll be asleep, and Miss Joan'll take you past her room all right. She knows I'm here, and that I am her friend, does Joan; she'll call me if she wants any help. And she'll be down directly."

"Put out the candle, then," said Burnett Lynn. "It will be better for nobody to suspect that we are here."

He blew out the candle as he spoke, and sat down. The two men waited, almost in silence and darkness, for the sound of Joan's footsteps on the stairs. The house

was perfectly still. The wind, however, had risen, and blew fitfully round the corners of the lonely farmhouse. Two or three maid-servants only were inside the main building; the farm-labourers either slept in an adjoining small cottage, or had been despatched to the fair at Bicklebury. Burnett Lynn could not help speculating as to whether there had been any design in this removal of servants for the night. He knew that Jacobi wanted to obtain certain papers—"papers relating to poor Geoffrey's affairs," Nigel had told him—from Joan, and that Joan suspected Jacobi of intending to try to force her into giving them up; he also thought that Jacobi meant harm to Geoffrey himself; and these two considerations were quite sufficiently alarming to make him resolve that he would not quit the farmhouse until broad daylight, and that he would, moreover, spend the night in Geoffrey's room, if Joan would let him do so.

The half-hour passed by, but still no voice or step was heard.

"If she does not come soon," Burnett Lynn whispered to his companion, "I shall go upstairs to her myself."

But the words had scarcely left his lips when a woman's sharp, shrill cry for help rang in his ears, followed by other sounds, by the opening of a door, the scuffling of feet. Burnett Lynn did not hesitate a moment. With Joel at his heels he rushed upstairs to the place from which the noise proceeded. And this place, as he knew well, was Geoffrey Vanborough's room.

Joan had gone upstairs early that night, and had been surprised to find old Anthony, generally so faithful a watcher, fast asleep in an armchair by Captain Vanborough's bed. She tried, in some indignation, to rouse him; but it soon became evident to her that to awaken him thoroughly would be a very difficult task. He opened his eyes, muttered a word or two in reply to her remonstrance, then fell asleep again more soundly than before.

"Has he been drugged, then?" said Joan to herself, as she stood back at last and looked at him. "What is going to happen now? I wonder whether Mr. Tremaine will come to-night or not."

She had promised Patty, she remembered, that she would go to bed that night, and not sit up with Captain Vanborough; but she had made that promise because she expected both Mr. Tremaine and Doctor Burnett Lynn, as well as Anthony, to take charge of the sick man during the night. "I must tell Patty, in the morning, how it was," she said to herself, as she wheeled round a chair and placed the lamp in such a position that she could read by it. "I am glad to stay—especially if they mean to take you away from me, my darling." She said the last words half aloud as she turned to the sick bed. Anthony was asleep; he could not hear her nor see her, and yet his unconscious presence gave her courage. She knelt down and kissed Geoffrey's forehead; she uttered a few of those broken, prayerful, caressing words that he would have given the world to hear when he was alive and well. And then she settled down to her book and her quiet watchfulness beside his bed.

She passed some time in silent reading and thought, scarcely noticing how the time passed, until she heard a clock strike eleven. The wind was dying down, and for some minutes the rain seemed to have ceased. Joan noticed that her lamp burned dimly; she turned it up, but unavailingly; it flickered once or twice, sank down in a little blue flame, leaped up again, and then went out. Joan was about to cross the room in order to light the candles, which stood upon a little table near the door, when suddenly she stopped short and stood quite still. An unaccustomed sound had struck upon her ear.

Geoffrey's room was on the first floor. That side of the house was covered by a great pear tree, which had grown to enormous size and strength. The long, level branches, nailed beneath and around the windows, formed wonderfully easy and secure footing for anyone who desired to enter the house that way. Joan thought that she heard the peculiar creak of a branch against the outer wall, and not only the creak, but the sound of climbing feet and snatching hands outside the window. She listened, but all again was still.

She decided that her imagination had been too actively

awake, and made a step forward, resolving to look out of the window and set her nervous doubts at rest.

"I am not such a good nurse as I used to be; Doctor Burnett Lynn is right in speaking of taking Geoffrey away," she declared to herself. "I never used to feel these foolish fears of every little noise I heard. Well, I will set my mind at rest."

She stretched out her hand to the curtain, and then let it fall to her side. For she saw what suddenly convinced her that the sounds she had heard were real enough.

The curtains were of a pale chintz, and did not cover the whole window. A faint light shone from outside; it might be a gleam of moonlight, or the more transient flicker of a lamp, but, such as it was, it served to show, on the space of white blind between the curtains, outlined in shadow, the figure of a man in the very act of opening the window.

Joan was not a timid woman, but for a moment her heart stood still. The fear of Jacobi, which had haunted her for many days, rushed back upon her in double force. Was it he, or an emissary of his, who was attacking her now?

The window was thrown open so quickly and dexterously that she had not time to obey her first instinct—which was to fling herself upon the intruder and hurl him backwards—before the man was half inside the room.

Then Joan collected her thoughts. She stood between the window and Geoffrey's bed. Almost within reach of her hand was a bell-handle, which had lately been fixed there with a wire communicating with the kitchen. If she moved back a step she could reach it, and when it was pulled Joel would come. But it seemed to her possible that the man who had entered was a robber, who was merely using Geoffrey's room as a passage; and she determined not to ring or call for help until he had passed through this room into the other part of the house. The doctors had warned her against allowing any agitating or noisy scene to take place in Geoffrey's presence. It was just possible, they said, that he might be roused from unconsciousness by it, but with a fatal result. Calmly and resolutely, therefore, she stood in the deep shadow

of the unlighted room, holding her very breath lest he should know of her presence, waiting in a very agony of suspense for the robber to cross the room and let himself out into the passage. It was well known that Farmer Darenth and his son would be from home on the night of Bicklebury Fair. Probably, Joan thought to herself, the thief would make his way to her father's room to seek there for the cash-box that he kept in a locked cupboard at the head of his bed.

The man was inside the room by this time ; he stood still for a moment, glancing round him with evident suspicion. Joan felt as if he could see her as well as she saw him against the white window-blind and waving curtains. Old Anthony, still asleep in his chair, breathed hard and heavily. No other sound was to be heard.

A slight exclamation escaped the man's lips ; he stooped down and felt one of his ankles, as if he had hurt it in climbing into the house. "*Diablos !*" he said, to himself, almost below his breath. But Joan heard him, and her blood ran cold. It was Jacobi's voice.

He did not cross the room ; he advanced stealthily to Geoffrey's bed. Joan's hand closed convulsively on the bell-handle. With all her might and main she pulled it. Whether the bell rang or not she could not tell. The wire had been out of order several times. The probability was that it did not ring.

What was Jacobi doing ? He had produced a small lantern. He lighted it, and let the beams fall upon Geoffrey's face. For a minute or two he gazed in silence. Then he laughed to himself ; a low, malignant laugh, which boded ill to the person against whom such laughter was directed. And then he drew something from his breast, and Joan could see in his hand the glitter of something sharp and bright.

That was enough for her. She had waited almost too long already. With one quick movement she seized his arms from behind, and held them pinioned in her vigorous grasp. And then with all her strength she lifted up her voice and called for help.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

VANQUISHED

AT the sound of Joan's cry Burnett Lynn and Joel did not lose a moment in flying to her assistance. The room was in darkness, but they could dimly see that it contained two figures struggling in silent, perhaps deadly, conflict. To separate them was the first thing to be attempted. Burnett Lynn and his companion threw themselves at once upon Jacobi, expecting perhaps to find him easy to secure, but he fought with the savageness and agility of a wild cat. But the issue of such an encounter could not long be doubtful. Joel was a strong man, inured to poaching frays, and Burnett Lynn, slight as he looked, had muscles of steel. Only the desperation of the man could have prolonged the combat beyond the first three moments. But he was armed and his adversaries were not.

"A light! a light!" said Burnett Lynn at last. "Where are you, Anthony? Miss Darenth, a light if you have one."

Old Anthony had been roused from his slumber, and now stood stupidly gazing round him. Joan was on the alert at once. For a moment, when Jacobi had turned his fury upon the two men and left her free, she had staggered back with a feeling of actual faintness, but this sensation had vanished as soon as she saw that there was anything to be done. The candle threw its beams upon a strange scene. Burnett Lynn was holding Jacobi down upon the floor; the prisoner, although nearly exhausted, was struggling still, and uttering vicious threats and terrible oaths in Spanish. Joel stood over him preparing to tie his hands and feet with a piece of stout cord which he had taken from his pocket. The fight was over; Jacobi was vanquished at last.

"That will do," said Burnett Lynn, rising when the prisoner was secured. "We had better put him under lock and key and communicate with a magistrate at once."

Jacobi hissed out a curse.

"Have you a room in which we can secure him?" asked Burnett Lynn, turning to Joan. His face was dark and stern, with a slight paleness evident about the lips. "It is not fit for you to hear him speak. And I want him out of Captain Vanborough's room."

"My father's room is the safest. He can be locked in there until——"

"Until he is removed to X——," said the doctor, naming the town which contained the county gaol. "I will go—What is it, Joel?"

"This is his knife, I lay," said Joel, holding out a sharp-looking, slender weapon, which he had picked up from the floor. "It's well we got it from him afore he did any harm with it."

Burnett Lynn took the knife in his hand and looked at it keenly. The blade was wet.

"He had used it. Not on us," he said, glancing at Joan and Joel in turn. "Good heavens, he must have wounded Geoffrey."

He turned hastily to the bed. There lay Geoffrey, white and motionless as before, and yet, to the doctor's practised eye, with some strange, indefinable change upon his face. There was a convulsive twitching of the muscles about his eyes and mouth which had surely not been seen there before. And, wonderful as it might seem, it was equally certain that an audible sound was proceeding from the lips of the man who had lain for so many months without sense or motion, apparently between life and death.

"Joan!" The word was perfectly distinct, and the murmur that followed became even more so. "It is Joan who is hurt. Joan—wounded."

"Oh, thank God!" said Joan, clasping her hands. "He is speaking—he knows us at last! Thank God!" And down she went upon her knees by the bed and kissed the thin, white hand which lay outside the coverings.

"I knew he would get better; I knew he would speak to us again. Forgive me, sir," she said, suddenly remembering Burnett Lynn's presence, but almost too full of joy to care to hide the expression of it, "but I have waited long—long—to see this day."

Burnett Lynn had meanwhile been examining Geoffrey with some care. The hollow, uncertain accents were heard again. He bent his ear to catch what was said.

"Joan. Look to Joan. Wounded."

"Are you hurt, Joan?" said Burnett Lynn, quickly.

"I don't know. I haven't felt it. Ah, yes; I see my arm is bleeding. It is only a scratch."

"Let me see it."

The scratch, as Joan called it, was slight, and while he looked at it she gave him a short account of the manner of Jacobi's entrance.

"In short, an attempt on Geoffrey's life," he said, thoughtfully. "You can swear that he had the knife in his hand as he bent over Captain Vanborough's form?"

"Yes. I was only just in time—to prevent——"

Suddenly she turned white, sat down, and put her hand over her eyes. For a second or two he was alarmed; then he saw that she was only shedding a few very natural tears.

"I beg your pardon," she said at last. "It was so terrible to see him with that knife in his hand! I suppose it was then that I was hurt. I did not feel it at the time."

"You were very brave," he said, in a low voice; "he might have caused Geoffrey's death. We shall have to give our evidence to-morrow. I wish"—he stopped short, and added, as if to himself, "if it were only anybody else—anyone but me."

"I will go and rest for a little time," said Joan, drying her eyes, and perceiving that he was thinking of her no longer, "and, if you want me, sir, I shall be ready to come at any moment."

She slipped away to her own room, and Burnett Lynn returned to Geoffrey, who had fallen into a tranquil and

natural slumber, from which he did not wake until the sun was high.

Early in the morning Burnett Lynn went to the house of one of the nearest magistrates, and made a deposition concerning the events of the night; he returned to the farmhouse with the magistrate, Mr. Hewlett, and two police-officers, by whom Jacobi was at once taken into custody. Later in the day he was brought before the bench of magistrates on the charge of attempt to murder, and was committed to take his trial at the next assizes.

Burnett Lynn found his patient going on as well as could be desired. Geoffrey was very weak, but conscious of everything around him. He showed anxiety only when Joan was not at hand. It was to her that his eyes turned constantly; it was from her that he liked to receive food and drink, although she, with her arm in a sling, was less competent than usual to do him service. His sudden recovery of speech and power of movement was very puzzling to Burnett Lynn. And, indeed, it remained so, both to him and to many other doctors, and it is noted in many a work on medical science as one of the most obscure and extraordinary cases of the day.

When the necessary business respecting Jacobi had been transacted, Burnett Lynn began to chafe at Nigel's absence. Finding that Geoffrey was doing so well, therefore, he resolved to catch the earliest possible train to London, and return in the afternoon. He arrived in London tolerably early in the day, and went to Nigel's club. But Nigel was not there; only he had left a card—"in case Doctor Burnett Lynn should call," the porter said—and on this card were written simply the words: "No. 5, John Street, Old Ford. Ask for Mrs. Wilson." Burnett Lynn was puzzled. Where was Old Ford? Was Nigel staying there? Possibly he had had news of Clarice Vanborough at last. He made inquiries about the locality, and chartered a hansom cab to take him to the place in question. He reached it about three in the afternoon.

A cab was standing before the house, and the front door stood open. Burnett Lynn entered hastily and somewhat unceremoniously. There were signs of unaccustomed bustle and agitation in the house; a portmanteau was

being carried downstairs. He caught sight of the servant in the hall, and spoke to her.

"Is Mrs. Wilson at home?"

"Oh, yes, sir," said the maid, who looked cheerful and mildly excited; "she's here, sir. The young gentleman's here too, sir. And just to think—he wasn't the young lady's brother all the time. The wedding was this morning, sir."

"What is she talking about?" said Burnett Lynn to himself, as she pointed upstairs and nodded to him to pass on. He did not need a second invitation. Quickly he mounted the stairs, knocked at the door of "Mrs. Wilson's sitting-room," and as it stood ajar and a voice invited him to enter, he pushed it open and walked in.

There he stood aghast. He was in the presence of Maddalena—the woman whom he loved—the woman whom he had sought so long. He made a sudden step towards her, but before he could speak, his words were frozen upon his lips with surprise. Nigel Tremaine was also present, and beside him stood a pale girl whom the doctor did not know. Nigel's arm was round her waist, her head was leaning against his shoulder, his own face was full of proud tenderness and delight.

Burnett Lynn looked full at Maddalena, looked full at Nigel, and stopped short. "Maddalena!" he cried. "Tremaine!"

Nigel had not seen him enter. He turned round, still keeping his arm round the girl at his side, and met Burnett Lynn's stormy glance with a cool, bright smile.

"You have just come in time," he said. "Allow me to present you to my wife."

CHAPTER XXXIX

DEATH

MERLE had not slept much after her conversation with Gilbert. She rose in the early morning and went out into the garden, hoping that a breath of fresh air would cool her aching forehead and clear her thoughts.

"Where is Mrs. Vanborough?" Gilbert asked, at length, as he lay upon a sofa, completely exhausted by the fatigue of dressing. "Find her, and say that I should be glad if she would come."

The servant went in search of his mistress, but soon returned to say that he thought she must be busy; she was with Sir Wilfred in his study, and no one could gain admittance. And then, with a pang of absolute pain and terror, Gilbert realised what was going on. She had taken upon herself the task that he had dreaded; she had gone to confess his fault to Sir Wilfred, instead of compelling him to go. What would be the result?

He waited, suffering tortures of anxiety, remorse and doubt; waited for upwards of an hour in great distress of body and mind. And then, when he was growing faint from the intensity of his emotion, she returned.

She looked white and spent, but very calm. She sat down beside him and took his hand in hers. His dark eyes fixed themselves upon her hungrily. But he could not speak.

"Dearest," she said, gently, "I have told him."

Gilbert shivered from head to foot. Still he said nothing, only devoured her face with his great, eager, burning eyes. She continued softly, "Geoffrey is coming home. He will come to-day. And I have sent a servant to telegraph for Mr. Pengelly, so that one injustice may be remedied as soon as possible. We were right to tell the truth, dear."

He pressed her hand convulsively in token of assent.

"I think your father will not suffer from the news. I was afraid it might be too much for him. He was very much agitated at first. But he is calmer now. He is longing to tell Geoffrey that he—he was mistaken. I never heard him speak so lovingly of Geoffrey before."

Gilbert found voice at last. "And ourselves?" he said, hoarsely. "What does he say of me? What am I to do?"

"My darling," she said at last, with infinite tenderness, sadness and pity in her voice, "my own darling." And then she kissed him and laid her face to his. "Could you travel to London to-day, do you think?" she said, wistfully.

"We should be better at home. I have telegraphed already." And thus he learned that his father had refused to see or speak to him again.

And thus it happened that Gilbert's departure from Charnwood took place before Geoffrey's return, and before the reappearance of Nigel Tremaine and Burnett Lynn. These two friends came to the house together, but they did not find Sir Wilfred. To their astonishment they heard that Gilbert and his wife had gone to London, that the old baronet had ordered the carriage and driven in state to the Hillside Farm, and that a room had been prepared for the reception of Captain Vanborough. Charnwood Manor was in a curious state of confusion. Joy at the prospect of Geoffrey's return, and grief for the departure of Mrs. Gilbert Vanborough, were strangely intermixed.

Sir Wilfred had been conveyed with some difficulty to his son's bedside, and the two were left for a little time together.

Burnett Lynn was anxious that his patient should not be over-excited, and therefore ventured, after some hesitation, to present himself. Old Sir Wilfred's left hand—the only one that he could use at all—was clasped in one of Geoffrey's. The attitude was significant. The father and son had given each other no such token of affection since Geoffrey was a tiny lad of six.

"I owe you an apology, sir," said Sir Wilfred, still stately in his self-abasement. "I misjudged my son, and therefore I misjudged his friends. I was deceived—I——"

"Burnett Lynn won't bear malice," said Geoffrey, smiling faintly at his friend. "It was Nigel that you were hardest upon, sir, if you will allow me to say so. Nigel was always a good fellow, and a true friend to me."

He spoke with difficulty, and was beginning to look so much exhausted that Burnett Lynn grew anxious to end the scene. "Did you want to see Mr. Tremaine, sir?" he asked Sir Wilfred. "He is outside, and wishes greatly to speak to you."

Sir Wilfred hesitated, but Geoffrey spoke. "Yes," he said, in an eager whisper, "yes, father—for my sake."

The old man gave a silent assent, and Burnett Lynn went to the door.

"For your sake, indeed, Geoffrey," Sir Wilfred murmured. "I have only you. I have lost Gilbert—I have lost Clarice—you only——"

"Clarice lost? How?" Geoffrey's eyes turned in alarm to his father's face. "She is not—dead? Father, you forget how long it is since I have heard——"

"Neither dead nor lost," said Burnett Lynn, with decision, as he returned to the bedside with Nigel behind him. "Alive and well at the present moment, and only anxious for her father's forgiveness."

"Forgiveness for me, perhaps we should say, sir," said Nigel. "Clarice, at least, was not to blame. As my friend says, she is alive and well, and she became my wife this morning."

"Your wife?" said Sir Wilfred. "This morning! And you have known where she was all this time?"

"She has been in safe hands, sir. My mother knew," said Nigel.

Sir Wilfred held out his shaking hand.

"I can say nothing," he answered. "I have been to blame with—with my children. I can but thank God that He has restored—two—at least—of them—to me."

And then the thought of Gilbert recurred to him, and he hung his head.

"Where is Gilbert?" said Geoffrey, quickly.

But no one spoke.

"Gilbert has gone from my house—I know not whither," said Sir Wilfred at last, lifting up his handsome old face and snowy head. "We will not speak of him. He is as unworthy as—as I once thought you to be, my boy."

And he laid his hand on Geoffrey's arm again.

Geoffrey looked troubled.

"Father," he said, in a low tone, "if Gilbert told you—he must have repented—he must have suffered."

"He did not tell me," said Sir Wilfred, sternly. "His poor wife told me—poor Merle, who could not bear a wrong to be done—an injustice to be perpetrated. She forced him to allow the confession to be made."

"Then for her sake and for mine you must forgive him," said Geoffrey.

Clarice was brought to Charnwood next morning, to pay her father a short visit and to wonder at his unaccountable tenderness. There was much to be explained, much to be recounted, and Sir Wilfred took a keen interest in the details of the whole story. And when Geoffrey came back to Charnwood, his father seemed never so happy as when his wheeled chair had been brought into his son's room and he could sit beside him, look into his face, and sometimes hear his voice. But not for several days did Geoffrey prevail upon him to dictate the letter of forgiveness which was to recall Gilbert to his home.

On the day after this letter had been despatched there came a telegram from Merle to Nigel Tremaine.

"Sir Wilfred's letter received. Gilbert is too ill to travel, but will send a reply when able. Can you come to us for a few hours?"

Nigel travelled up to town by the next train, accompanied by Burnett Lynn.

The servant who opened the door of Gilbert's pretty house in Chelsea looked very grave. His master was worse, he feared, but he would tell Mrs. Vanborough of Mr. Tremaine's arrival. And presently Merle came into the drawing-room. She gave her hand to Nigel and to Burnett Lynn in turn, but at first she did not speak.

"How is he?" asked Nigel.

"No better." She looked down, steadied her voice, and added, "the doctors say there is no hope. He is very ill."

Nigel was shocked and silent. "I am grieved to hear his," he said at last. "Can we do nothing?"

She shook her head. "I think he would like to see you," she said. "He was glad of Sir Wilfred's letter this morning. But he can hardly speak now." She turned to Burnett Lynn.

"I thought I should like you to see him, too. You know the doctor who has attended him. He asked where you could be found."

"I wish I may be of use," said Burnett Lynn, gravely.

"Come first, please," she said to him, in a soft, calm manner which contrasted strongly with a look of repressed emotion given by the pallor of her face and the violet circles round her heavy eyes. "Then you, Mr. Tremaine. This way."

Nigel was left alone for some minutes. After a time Burnett Lynn returned, looking very grave and deeply moved.

"There is nothing to be done," he said. "Poor fellow!" And he then went to the window and looked out. "Go up to him, Tremaine," he said, without looking round; "he was asking for you."

Nigel went.

"He wants me to say to you," Merle said, softly, "that he is sorry for the trouble that he brought upon you and Clarice. But for him there would have been no delaying of your marriage, no misplaced confidence in Jacobi. For all the pain and misfortune of the past two years he has been to blame."

"Dear Gilbert," said Nigel, "I understand. You need say no more. Remember you have two brothers now to stand by you."

"He must not speak any more," said Merle, hastily, seeing that her husband's lips moved. "Nigel will come again, Gilbert. Let him go now."

One word did Gilbert speak, which Nigel bent to hear. It was the word "good-bye." Then his head sank back upon Merle's shoulder, and it was thus that Nigel saw them last together.

He joined Burnett Lynn, and they walked away from the house in silence. Nigel was to return in the evening, and in the meantime he went to his club to pass away the time. Burnett Lynn had another errand. He wanted to visit Maddalena Vallor.

Jacobi was awaiting his trial in the Hertfordshire gaol; his wife had taken lodgings in the town of X——, and was reported to be visiting her husband nearly every day. Burnett Lynn thought it possible, however, that she had by this time returned to her former lodging in Old Ford; and there he resolved to seek her. He travelled eastward

by the District Railway, and, while waiting at a station, purchased a newspaper.

The first words that met his eyes were these :

"The prisoner, Jacobi, or Vallor, who was awaiting his trial for attempted murder and robbery, was this morning found dead in his bed in the Infirmary of X—— gaol. No further particulars are at present reported."

Burnett Lynn sat down on a bench and closed his eyes for a moment. What did this mean? Had Jacobi, indeed, killed himself? Was anyone else to blame?

He hastened to John Street, Old Ford, with all available speed. And here, almost to his surprise, he found Madame Vallor. She was dressed in bonnet and cloak, and seemed to be on the point of leaving the house.

"Maddalena, is this true?" he asked.

She glanced at him coldly, with a curious smile upon her lips. "Yes," she said, "it is true."

"How did it happen?"

She gave him another cold look. "Did you think," she said, "that I had killed him?"

"Don't torture me, Maddalena," Burnett Lynn said, in a low, quick voice. "I can't bear it."

"I did not mean to torture you," she answered, gently. "I will say no more. I must go to X—— at once. Like you, I have only just received the news."

"Go? Without another word?"

"I have nothing to say."

"Maddalena!"

"Nothing to say—yet. I will tell you all, by-and-bye. You shall be my priest; I will confess to you. Does that satisfy you?"

"It must," said Burnett Lynn; but his mind was scarcely set at rest.

He went back to Nigel Tremaine and remained with him until the hour when Merle expected them. Then they set out for Chelsea, and arrived there about seven o'clock.

They were admitted at once, and were taken into the studio. Here they looked with a sort of tender mournfulness at the unfinished sketches and pictures which they

knew too well would never be completed, when the door opened and Merle came in.

She was very pale, and her hands were outstretched as if she felt, rather than saw, her way; then fell down in a swoon at Nigel's feet, and they knew that Gilbert Vanborough was dead.

Burnett Lynn had to wait some days before he heard again from Maddalena. And at last he received a note from her and a packet of papers. He read the note first; it consisted of a few words only.

"Read the papers I send you," she said, "then judge me, if you will. I have written an account of my life for you; it is well that you should know what it has been. We shall meet afterwards if you wish."

CHAPTER XL

MADDALENA'S STORY

"FOR you, Oliver Burnett Lynn, and for no other is this paper written. Keep it as a last memorial of one of the most wretched women who have ever lived.

"I have long purposed giving you the history of my life—as far, at least, as it concerns yourself to know it. I will but sum up the history of my first eighteen or twenty years in as few words as possible; you shall judge how far it has influenced my after life.

"My mother, Elizabeth Darenth, the sister of Reuben Darenth, of the Hillside Farm, was a remarkably beautiful woman. You have seen Joan Darenth. She is what I think my mother must have been before she was wasted with illness and consumed by care.

"She married, against the wish of her family, a man called Perez, who took her with him to Paris. Here she discovered, to her horror, that his means of support consisted only of the money he made at cards, and, later on, by the profit gained in a disreputable little gaming house of which he became the proprietor. Here I was born, here reared; here my mother died when I was twelve

years old, and left me worse than orphaned. When I was sixteen my whole soul revolted at the life my father would have me lead. With some difficulty I obtained his permission to go on the stage ; I remained there until I was six-and-twenty, gaining considerable success from time to time. Remember this—remember that I was once an actress, as you read my story.

“ When I was six-and-twenty my father died, leaving me his sole heiress. I knew little of the value of money ; I was friendless, alone in the world, and then I met the man who professed to love me, the man you have known as Constantine Jacobi, whom I knew then as Constantine Vallor.

“ I married him, and found, in a fortnight from the wedding day, that I had thrown away my life.

“ No need to tell you how I was undeceived. Imagine anything of baseness, of cruelty, that you will, it cannot transcend the deliberate baseness and cruelty of which Jacobi was capable.

“ In a few months he was arrested at Marseilles for stabbing a comrade in the street, and condemned to prison for life. This comrade had been the lover of a woman called Antonia St. Pierre, who played minor parts in a provincial French theatre. Jacobi was her lover, too. Hence the quarrel.

“ He was sent to prison ; and in his absence my little child, Teresa, was born. You know whether I loved that child or not ; you know what she was to me.

“ My husband effected his escape in a singularly ingenious manner, and sought me out. By our united efforts we made our way to England, and were promised a passage to America. I had hopes of Constantine Jacobi then. He seemed at times to feel some sorrow, some remorse for his past conduct ; but little by little this spark of conscience, if such it was, became extinguished ; little by little upon our voyage out he relapsed into the old habits of violence and cruelty.

“ The shipwreck came. No need for me to dwell upon the horrors of those days and nights. Did you think I did not know that my child was dead when I hid her little face beneath my cloak ? If her little lips had not grown

cold, if her tiny limbs had not turned stiff and chill, even then I should have known—from the look of pity in your eyes, Oliver Burnett Lynn—that she was dead.

“Do I weary you with my references to her? I tell you that Constantine Jacobi used to wish, in my hearing, that the laws would allow him to strangle the child which I had borne him! But you will, at any rate, be patient when I speak of her. I am sure you will.

“For her sake I was trying to be a good woman. For her sake I did his will; I was an obedient wife. Wife? I was an obedient slave to him, I should rather say. For her sake alone I cared to live.

“And then she died—after all, my child died!

“In the days upon the island, when I lay in the fisherman’s hut like one stunned by the violence of the blow that had fallen upon me, I seemed to go through worse than the bitterness of death. When I rose from my bed and heard what you had to tell me—when I knew that my husband had forsaken me—when I stood beside my baby’s grave—I vowed that I would never weary, that I would shrink from no toil, no danger, no suffering, and no sin, until I had punished Constantine Vallor, and made him feel something of the anguish that he had inflicted upon me.

“I did not keep that vow. It was impossible to keep it. It was impossible that that man should ever suffer as I had done. But that was not all.

“I will come back to this part of my story presently, and tell you why I broke the vow then made so solemnly and held sacred for so long. Let me pass on to our parting upon the island, and our separation for so many years.

“And, first, why did I send you away from me?

“Because you, with your kindly eyes—you, with your tender care for my child’s last resting-place—you, with your scorn of what was weak, and base, and mean—you might have tempted me, I thought, to relinquish my desire for the vengeance which I had resolved to take. I was afraid of the cool, calm judgment which might have made me feel my vengeance a thing not worth taking.

“I had resources at my disposal of which Constantine Jacobi—to give him the name by which you know him

best—had been left in ignorance. My innate distrust of him—even when I loved him best—had led me to place a portion of the wealth left me by my father beyond his reach. I had an income—small indeed, but regular and sufficient for my needs. I communicated with an old-fashioned, respectable firm of solicitors in New York, arranging to draw my money through them, and also to keep you informed, once a year, of my continued existence.

“Then I began my search for Constantine Vallor.

“It may seem to you that I had undertaken a hopeless quest. Not so much so as it appears. He had been in America before ; I knew what were likely to be his haunts ; I knew the name of some of his associates. He was so well assured of my death that he took little trouble to conceal his identity.

“For nearly seven years, then, I occupied myself in following him from place to place, intending ultimately to denounce him to the Government, and send him back to his French prison. But for almost the whole of that period he eluded me by never venturing into places where either Government, police force, or extradition treaty—had any such existed—would have been of much avail. He was safe enough in South America, and there for full five years he stayed. And, finally, I wearied of this aimless watch over his movements ; I wearied of the sickening task of unravelling his plots ; and then I fell ill, and during my illness he left the town in which he had been living and I lost sight of him.

“I waited until my next quarter’s money was paid to me, and then took my passage to England, thinking that, at any rate, I would die amongst my kinsfolk. I made my way to Reuben Darenth’s farm, near Charnwood.

“You will guess how they treated me there. You will imagine with what gentleness, what generosity, what sympathy, my cousin, Joan Darenth, took me to her heart and tried to comfort me. She did more to heal my wounds and restore my failing strength than I should have thought that human hands and hearts could do. She made me live once more, and for a time I was at peace.

“Then came the change.

“I arrived at the Hillside Farm in August, not very

long after the departure of Geoffrey Vanborough, Nigel Tremaine, and Luke Darenth for Buenos Ayres. In November, my husband's murderous attack upon Mr. Tremaine in the tent took place, and his subsequent expulsion from the camp. It was then that you made Mr. Tremaine's acquaintance. In December, Constantine Jacobi seemed to have decided to go to England, thinking, no doubt, that nobody there could identify him, and that he would be safer than in America, where he was becoming too well known in many of the large towns. My own connection with Charnwood was probably the means of attracting him thither; perhaps he meant, in the first instance, to apply to Reuben Darenth for assistance. If so, he never carried out his intention. To this day Reuben Darenth has no suspicion that Sir Wilfred Vanborough's secretary was the husband of his niece, Maddalena Vallor.

"He fastened himself upon Sir Wilfred; he began to use his power over him and over Clarice Vanborough. I did not hear of him for some weeks after his arrival at Charnwood Manor; I was an invalid, and lived a secluded life. I learned, in the same day, that my husband was at Charnwood, and that he was seeking a companion—a lady companion—for Miss Vanborough.

"I went to London and sought materials for my disguise. Accident threw me in contact with a woman whom I had known in former years. This woman was the bedridden mother of Antonia St. Pierre.

"She entered readily into my schemes—into as much of them, at least, as I chose to tell her. Her daughter was dead; she had married a young Englishman named Danvers, and died shortly after the marriage. He was dead also. *I personated Antonia Danvers.*

"We had been the same height; but she was slightly lame and crooked. Slightly, I say; but I purposely exaggerated these defects of figure. Her hair had been golden—mine became golden, too, by means of a hair-dresser's shop. Her eyes were lighter than mine; but I trusted that this difference would escape Jacobi's notice. Rouge, blanc de perle, and a camel's-hair brush did everything else that was necessary. Thus equipped I knocked

at Mrs. Gilbert Vanborough's door. You yourself would not have known me if you had met me in the street. I left a card, on which my name was printed—*Mrs. Danvers*—and beneath the name I wrote my address and the words—*formerly Antonia St. Pierre*. Then I went back to my lodgings—with old Madame St. Pierre in East Street, and waited.

"Long before the hour which I had fixed for my interview with Jacobi he was with me. I knew well that my device would not fail. He was evidently uneasy, and desirous of knowing what I wanted. I said that I was poor and wanted money, that I could do his work better than anybody else, and that I would be Miss Vanborough's companion.

"I was installed as Clarice Vanborough's companion at a high salary, with the promise of three hundred pounds down on the day when she should marry—my husband, Constantine Vallor. I knew that I could stop his proceedings at any moment I chose. I knew that she would never ultimately be forced into marrying the man she hated. I did not see that I was doing any harm in letting the matter go on—for a time, at least. I could crush him better by-and-bye. I was almost ready to do it; I had my hand raised, as it were, to strike the blow, when I made a discovery which changed my plan, once and for all.

"The one woman in the world—besides my mother—who had been good to me, the one woman in the world whom I had reason to bless for her never-failing tenderness to one who came to her door like an outcast—homeless, friendless, and weak—that woman was Joan Darenth. And Joan Darenth was in love with Geoffrey Vanborough.

"I made this discovery accidentally. That is to say, I made it by reading—not accidentally—the pages of Clarice Vanborough's locked diary.

"How did I come to do that? you will say. I did it in conjunction with Constantine Jacobi, whom I helped to fasten Miss Vanborough into her own room and then to ransack her papers. I had already written to Geoffrey Vanborough, and believed that he and Nigel Tremaine would be on their way home.

"I found out the secret of Joan's love for Geoffrey, which she had confessed to Clarice, and when I heard the true story of Geoffrey's exile from England, and the circumstances under which he had submitted to that exile—then I regretted the terms which I had used. You saw the letter. You know how I called upon Geoffrey to come and save his sister. I should have written to Nigel Tremaine to come back to England, not to Geoffrey, if I had known all.

"Jacobi told me, that night, the story of Gilbert's guilt and of Geoffrey's generous acceptance of the punishment.

"I meant to bide my time until Geoffrey and Nigel came home together—as I knew they would do; and as soon as they came I meant to make all clear. For Joan's sake I renounced my vengeance. I would tell the truth and let Jacobi do his worst. The marriage should be stopped. Clarice should be given to Nigel, Joan to Geoffrey, and Geoffrey's honour cleared. Then I would say good-bye to these people, whom I left happy, successful, prosperous in every respect, and go my way with my husband. He might kill me if he liked.

"In the meantime, I induced Clarice to consent to the engagement by assuring her that it would never come to a marriage; and I did my best to hinder the fixing of the wedding-day.

"Carefully, day after day, I searched the columns of the *Times* for news of the arrival of steamers from Buenos Ayres. Day after day passed by, and still Geoffrey Vanborough did not come. Jacobi's suspicions were aroused by my endeavours to postpone the wedding-day. He hurried it on, in spite of Clarice's flight from home and subsequent illness, he hurried it on. It was fixed for the first of February, and I could delay it no longer.

"I gave up the hope of Geoffrey's coming. On the wedding morning I dressed the bride, gave her into her father's keeping, then set to work as speedily as possible to divest myself of my disguise. Then, with my veil down, I started for Charnwood Church, reached it before the arrival of the wedding party, and took my seat. When the English priest asked if there were any obstacle to the

marriage, I meant to stand up in my place and answer—'Yes, there is an obstacle. I am Constantine Jacobi's wedded wife.'

"You know what happened. Geoffrey Vanborough and Nigel Tremaine came home indeed before the wedding, but Geoffrey was helpless—speechless. Mr. Tremaine's testimony was, however, sufficient to stop the performance of the marriage ceremony; Clarice was taken home by her father, and Geoffrey carried to the farm. I went back to Charnwood Manor, vainly imagining that the work was done—that Jacobi, the enemy of all the Vanboroughs, would now be banished from the Vanboroughs' house.

"Sir Wilfred's insensate folly soon showed me my mistake. I had gone over to the Vanboroughs' side, you see. I was no longer trying to avenge my wrongs—I was saving Clarice Vanborough, for Joan's sake, from the hands of weak and wicked men. An accidental meeting with Mr. Tremaine in the park favoured my purpose. I left him alone with Clarice for a quarter-of-an-hour. At the end of that time she had remembered him, clung to him, and would hardly let him go. Then I knew that my experiment—if Nigel Tremaine would help me to carry it out—was almost certain to be successful. It was I who proposed that during our journey to London we should make our escape from the Vanboroughs altogether.

"The details of our escape would hardly interest you. Of course, we changed our clothes in the train. We went by the Metropolitan Railway to Bishopsgate Street, and thence to Old Ford. Here we had taken lodgings, and here I was known by the name of Mrs. Wilson. Here you were astonished and dismayed upon the marriage-day to find your friend, Nigel Tremaine.

"And now I come to one of the most important parts of my narrative. And here you will find the explanation of Constantine Jacobi's sudden death.

"When I heard that he was in prison for his attempt to murder Geoffrey Vanborough, you said to me:

"'Now you will come forward! You must give your evidence at the trial.'

"'If that trial ever takes place,' I said, 'I will.'

"Why did I utter those words? I attached no meaning to them; they seemed to be wrung from me by some other will than mine. And then I looked into your face, and saw, by the expression which flitted across it, that you, at least, attached a meaning to them, that you were startled and repelled.

"You will remember how earnestly you urged your views upon me; how you entreated me not to see my husband alone. I set aside your arguments and your entreaties.

"Independently of you, therefore, I made my journey to X——, the town in which stands the county gaol, and made my application to be allowed access to my husband. After a few words with the proper authorities, I obtained it at once.

"'Tell him,' I said to the man who unlocked the door, 'that it is Mrs. Danvers.'

"He gave me an odd look and repeated the name.

"'Yes,' I said, steadily, 'Mrs. Danvers, if you please.'

"He opened the door and looked in. 'A lady to see you—Mrs. Danvers,' he said. 'Shall I stay with you, ma'am?'

"'No,' I said. 'I would rather be left alone.'

"All this time I had kept my black veil over my face. Jacobi had started to his feet and stood regarding me with an evil and sinister look in his bloodshot eyes. He was very white, and his form trembled. He looked like a wild animal preparing for a spring.

"'You betrayed me,' he hissed out. 'You ruined me! I'll be revenged yet.'

"I think he would have flown at my throat at that moment—I think he would have strangled me with those long, lean fingers that twitched with murderous eagerness—if I had not then put back my veil. The rage died out of his face, and a look of unutterable fear and horror came into it.

"'They said it was—Antonia!' I heard him murmur to himself, 'and it is the face of the dead!'

"'Not dead,' I said, stepping forward and confronting him. 'Look at me well; I am the woman whom you

married and left to perish on the wreck. I have seldom lost sight of you during the last eight years.'

"His next question amazed me. He had shaded his eyes with his hands, as if to shut me out of his sight; now he uncovered them and glanced behind me, as though seeking for someone else.

" 'And the child?' he asked, hurriedly. 'She—is she living, too?'

"I answered, 'No.' I could say nothing more.

"He flung himself into a seat, and spoke with averted head and sullen eyes.

" 'Well,' he said, 'what do you want with me, then? I thought they said it was Antonia Danvers.'

" 'It is Antonia Danvers. I was Antonia Danvers.'

"He turned his head.

" 'You—Antonia Danvers? What do you mean?'

" 'You have forgotten,' I said, slowly, 'that I was once an actress. You did not remember Antonia St. Pierre very accurately. Her mother helped me to personate her. Antonia herself is dead. She died four years ago. I wanted to be Clarice Vanborough's companion, and you helped me to obtain the situation?'

" 'You!' he said. 'You!—Maddalena?'

" 'I—Maddalena.'

"A sullen fire began to gleam in his eyes; his lips turned white. He rose from his seat.

" 'And you are mad enough,' he said, 'to come and tell me so? It is what I might have expected had I known that you were alive. What have you been doing with yourself for all these years?'

" 'Will you listen to me quietly if I tell you?'

" 'I don't know. Well, yes; I suppose I may say I will.'

"He gave the promise reluctantly, but there was some curiosity in his eyes. And then I told him the story of the last eight years.

"I told it in Spanish as rapidly as possible, for I remembered that the warder was in our neighbourhood, and that the time allowed for my visit was limited. And, indeed, before I had quite finished, the key turned in the lock, and the man's voice told me that the time was over.

"My husband had been sitting in a crouching, wearied manner on the side of his bed, as he listened to my story; he made no remark until I rose to go, and then he uttered a short, savage laugh.

" 'A nice story for a wife to tell her husband,' he said, throwing himself down on his bed with his face turned away from me. 'Going, are you? Well, remember that I don't want to see you again.'

" 'I have more to say. I am coming to-morrow.'

" 'If you do,' he said, below his breath, with an epithet which I will not record, 'if you do, I'll kill you.'

"The warder did not hear. I made no answer, but walked out of the cell, almost wondering, in truth, to find myself still alive and still unharmed.

"I went next day. He was in bed, and looked haggard and ill, but made no objection to my visit; his manner was sullen, but quieter than before.

" 'Are you suffering pain?' I asked him.

" 'Yes,' he answered.

" 'Have you seen the doctor?'

" 'Yes. He won't do anything for me. It's my opium I want; nothing more. I shall die if I don't get it soon.'

"He turned restlessly upon his bed, then exclaimed:

" 'Sit down, can you not? To see you standing there like a statue would distract any man's nerves. Why did you not stop the marriage before?'

" 'I was ready to stop it—I was there. Mr. Tremaine did my work for me.'

" 'And when it was stopped,' he said, uneasily, 'why did you not come forward? Why did you take Clarice away?'

" 'I wanted to protect her. No one could do so better than I.'

" 'Why not?'

" 'Because I saw what others might not have seen. As far as you were capable of love, you loved Clarice Vanborough.'

"He started up with gleaming eyes and working features; looked me savagely in the face, then sank down upon his pillow and burst into furious ejaculations.

" 'Love her?' he cried. 'I hated her, the little fury, the jade, the witch! She has been my ruin. But for her I should have got off to America long ago.'

"I did not speak. I knew that he had not yet done. Presently he broke out again with a sort of despairing groan.

" 'All night long I see her—her and the others—all dead; all calling upon me to save them. Ah?'

"He gasped, stopped short, and gazed at me with a wide-open, horrified stare.

" 'Are you one of them?' he said, in a whisper. 'Are you like the others, or are you flesh and blood?'

" 'I am flesh and blood,' I answered him. 'What others do you mean?'

" 'I mean Foligny,' he said; 'Foligny—Antonia's lover—whom I killed at Marseilles, you know; and Perrol at Rosario; and Juana, the Indian girl—and—and all the others; and Clarice.'

" 'Clarice is not dead,' I said, thinking to soothe him in his half-delirious excitement.

" 'No,' he said, 'but these others are—and the child too; your child. I killed her—I killed them all. Oh, my God!'

"And then he fell back exhausted, and lay for some moments without speaking.

"After a time he opened his eyes and fixed them once more upon me. They wore a dazed expression now, and his face was ashy white.

" 'What was I saying?' he murmured. 'My head is weak. Did I say anything strange?' An uneasy look stole into his face as he waited for my answer.

" 'You said enough to show me,' I replied, 'that I had no need to seek for vengeance. I might well have left the matter in God's hands. He knows how to punish better than I. I leave you to Him.'

"I turned to go, but he screamed and caught at my dress.

" 'You are cursing me,' he said. 'You have the evil eye. You think that what the priests say is true? Oh, forgive me—have mercy on me, Maddalena, and then perhaps God will have mercy upon me too.'

" 'Mercy!' I said, turning back to him. 'Did you have

mercy upon me or upon my child? Did you ever grant it when I asked for it?’

“ ‘I was mad—I was a villain—I was anything bad you like to call me,’ he said, writhing in agony as he lay upon his bed. ‘Help me, Maddalena. You loved me a little once. I will do anything you tell me. I am sure you could save me if you chose—you were always clever——’

“ ‘I can do nothing for you,’ I said, coldly. ‘Others are concerned besides myself. I have no power.’

“ ‘But you can forgive me, Maddalena! You do not know how miserable I am! And they will send me to prison again for years and years, and I shall never be able to banish these terrible visions from my eyes—the faces—the baby’s face——’ He stopped and shut his eyes. ‘If you would forgive me, perhaps they would go away!’ he moaned.

“ ‘She was your child as well as mine,’ I said. ‘I do not wonder that she haunts you still.’

“ He hid his face and groaned aloud. For a moment I was tempted to leave him so, and never look on him again. I had said that he should cry to me for mercy before he died; and I had kept my word. What more was there for me to say or do?

“ He uttered one cry more. ‘Maddalena, help me—for Heaven’s sake!’

“ I drew nearer to his side. ‘I will help you if I can,’ I said, gently. ‘You were a bad husband to me, Constantine Vallor. You were cruel and unfaithful. You would not try to save my child’s life. What weight of crime may lie upon your soul is known only to God and yourself. But I am your wife, and I am here. I will do for you what I can.’

“ His eyes glittered. He caught my hand and kissed it before I could prevent him.

“ I thought that perhaps he wished to make some unexpected confession, or to charge me with some message to the Vanboroughs expressive of contrition or regret. But I was wrong.

“ With a quick, furtive movement he drew a little bottle from underneath his pillow. ‘I hid it,’ he said. ‘I

cheated them, and kept myself alive. I cannot bear my life without it. Get it filled for me once more, Maddalena, and that will give me strength and hope again.'

"I had the bottle in my hand. 'Opium?' I said, beneath my breath.

"'Don't let anyone hear,' he answered, in the same suppressed voice. 'Don't let anyone see. The doctor gives me a little, but he will not give me enough. Don't deny me my only comfort in life, Maddalena, for Heaven's sake.'

"I put the bottle in my pocket, and promised to bring it, filled, upon the morrow.

"I thought at first merely of alleviating his sufferings. I knew that he had been in the habit of taking large doses of opium, and that the cessation of these doses was probably producing great nervous pain. I had promised to help him if I could. With this thought in my mind, I obtained the quantity he required, although with some difficulty, and only by means of going to different chemists' shops and representing that I wanted it for toothache. When the bottle was full I knew that it contained sufficient to last him for several days and nights. How he would conceal it from the authorities I did not know. That was his affair, not mine.

"What do you think I did when the possible consequences of my action occurred to me? I sat down and laughed aloud. You had thought that I wanted to murder him, had you? Why, death is surely a less terrible punishment than life! Besides, I need not hold myself accountable for the use that he might make of the drug I brought him.

"I faced the situation. I determined to risk it. Let him choose his own path. His blood be on his own head and not on mine.

"I took the opium to him as soon as I had obtained it.

"You know the details of the inquest. I was examined, and told the simple facts—that my husband had been in the habit of taking large doses of laudanum, that he had entreated me to procure some for him on the ground that it would prolong his life, and that I had consented to do

so. I was blamed severely for my conduct, and some nominal penalty for breaking the rules of the prison was imposed, but on the whole I was thought guilty merely of an error of judgment, and not of any intentional desire to shorten the days of my husband's life.

"Now you know all. In some things I have been more guilty—in others, perhaps, less guilty—than you thought. If you are wise you will blot out from your mind the memory of a woman whose powers of faith, and love, and goodness had been crushed out of her before she saw your face.

"You see now the reason why I took Clarice Vanborough away from her home and friends. Even had I discovered myself she would not have been safe from Constantine Vallor's schemes. She was only safe while hidden from him, until she became the wife of a man who could protect her.

"And now for myself. I have made my plans. I am not fit to die yet. I think that in some quiet corner of the world I may learn something further of the place in which my child yet lives—that I may there prepare my soul to meet her before—as your heretic Bible says—'before I go hence and be no more seen.'

"I should like to bid your farewell. Come and speak to me once more. You will find me at the house in East Street—I told you where it was—at five o'clock to-morrow evening. If you would look upon my face once more in life, come there and say good-bye."

CHAPTER XLI

"FARE YOU WELL, MY TASK IS DONE!"

Thus suddenly the narrative of Maddalena Vallor's life broke off. There was no signature and no date.

He closed the roll of manuscript at last and thrust it from him, then laid his folded arms upon the table, and bent his head upon them. He did not stir until the beams

of the morning sun stole softly into the room and made the light turn dim.

He spent the greater part of the day in walking ; however, he found himself in East Street before five o'clock.

He did not know for whom to inquire, but the servant girl who opened the door said at once, " Madame Vallor is expecting you, sir. Will you walk this way ? "

And he was ushered into a small room opening out of the passage, where, in the gathering gloom of twilight, he could for a moment or two distinguish nothing. Before long, however, he saw that he was in the presence of two persons. One had risen to meet him ; one sat in a corner of the room and did not seem to stir.

" Maddalena ! " said Burnett Lynn.

" You have come, then ? " said Maddalena, as she stood before him.

His eyes wandered to the figure in the corner. " Can I speak to you alone ? " he said, advancing a step closer and lowering his voice.

She shook her head. Now that his eyes had grown accustomed to the dim light, he could see that her face, though deadly white, was very calm ; that her hands were clasped before her, over a little crucifix. She was dressed in black, and over her head she wore what he took to be a widow's veil.

" Give me your judgment," she said, gently. " You have read my story ; you know all. Am I a murderess or am I not ? You need not be afraid to speak."

She waited in silence for some moments. Then Burnett Lynn made a sudden step forward and possessed himself of both her hands, and looked her in the face.

" Whatever you are, Maddalena," he said, huskily, " whatever you may have done, I always loved you, and I love you still. What matters the past ? The future is before us and belongs to us."

She gazed into his face for a moment as if fascinated, then dropped her eyes and withdrew her hands from his.

" You mistake," she said, with a curious, cold gentleness of manner that made him shiver in spite of himself. " The future belongs to God."

"What do you mean?" said Burnett Lynn.

"I told you," she said, "that I should pass the rest of my days in preparing for another world—another life. I mean that I am going to enter a convent in Belgium."

Burnett Lynn uttered one short, sharp exclamation of dismay, and then stood mute.

"If you have not judged me," she went on calmly, "I have judged myself. I was a murderess at heart. I knew that my husband would kill himself. The guilt of his death lies upon my head. My life in the world is ended. Think of me as of one gone down into the tomb."

"A tomb, indeed!" he cried, passionately. "Maddalena, think what you are doing!"

"I have chosen," she said, in quiet tones. "I leave England to-night with this good sister who has been appointed my guide. I see you by permission only, and in her presence."

She signed to her companion, whom Burnett Lynn now discerned to be attired in the garb of a Sister of Mercy.

He uttered a low groan of pain. He struck his heel impatiently upon the floor, bit his lip until it bled, then walked hastily to the window and back again. There was a slight movement in the room. For a minute or two Burnett Lynn could not command himself sufficiently to speak. And when at last he rose, with eager, imploring words upon his lips, he was alone. Maddalena and her companion both were gone.

Meanwhile, things had not been standing still at Charnwood Manor. Geoffrey wanted something more than efficient attendance. He wanted Joan's gentle hands about him; he wanted to see Joan's stately figure before his eyes. But now that he was conscious and on the fair road to complete recovery, now that he was reconciled to his father and safe in Charnwood Manor, Joan obstinately refused to come near him. And Geoffrey chafed and fretted at her absence, with the petulance that comes of returning health and strength, until it seemed that nobody could nurse him aright, and the old servants of the house said among themselves that he had lost his calm and easy temper.

Sir Wilfred, too, annoyed him terribly by the tone he took in reference to Joan.

"We must really do something for that young woman at the farm," he would say, thoughtfully; "I wish you could suggest something that she would like," Sir Wilfred one day added. "An annuity or——"

"My dear father," said Geoffrey at last, driven to desperation, "there is only one thing that I could ever offer Miss Darenth, and that I do not suppose she would accept."

"What is it?" said Sir Wilfred, with some anxiety.

"Myself, sir."

"Yourself? Good Heaven, Geoffrey, you don't mean—a farmer's daughter!" Sir Wilfred could say no more.

"The best and loveliest woman in the world," said Geoffrey, with emotion. "The woman who nursed me through a wearisome illness, who saved my life at the risk of her own——"

Sir Wilfred had a good many objections to make, but the habit of dependence upon another person's opinion had become strong with him, and seemed likely to resolve itself into the habit of dependence upon Geoffrey. This being the case, he listened, with great deference, to the way in which Geoffrey disposed of his objections one after another; and finally astonished and almost silenced his son by saying, with extraordinary gentleness, "I have made your life so hard to you of late, Geoffrey, that I want to render the rest of your course as easy as possible. If you have set your heart upon marrying Miss Darenth, I—I will not object."

This was so much beyond what Geoffrey had expected him to say that he found it difficult to express his sense of gratitude for Sir Wilfred's withdrawal of opposition. But Sir Wilfred did even more. He talked to Nigel Tremaine about the matter, and finally made him the bearer of a short note, begging Joan to come to Charnwood Manor, in order to see Geoffrey, "who was anxious," Sir Wilfred said, "to tell her with his own lips how deeply grateful he was to her for all she had done for him."

Joan, on receiving this letter, was inclined to refuse to go, and hinted as much to Mr. Tremaine.

"It will be less kind to Geoffrey than I think you ought to be," Nigel answered her coolly. "He misses you very much. You might at least go and see him. See, Clarice is here to fetch you. She came with me on purpose."

And when Clarice held out her hand and said, "Yes, Joan, come," how could Joan refuse?

Geoffrey, lying restless and uncomfortable upon his couch, wondering how he could get Joan to come to Charnwood Manor, pondering over the news which had just been brought to him that the Darenths were going to join Luke in South America, became suddenly conscious of a woman's presence in his room, of an agreeable softening of the light, of a clever re-arrangement of his coverings. He turned his head, and his eyes met those of Joan, who had just entered the room and taken upon herself to lower the blinds and readjust his bedclothes in the very way she used to do at the farm. He started, and uttered her name with a look and accent of delight which pleased her more than she would have liked to say.

"Joan! So you have come back to me at last?" he cried.

"I hope you are better, Mr. Geoffrey," she said, rather tamely.

"I should be better if I had better nursing," said Geoffrey. "Nobody does anything so well as you, Joan. You will stay with me now, will you not?"

He had taken both her hands in his, and was looking into her face with eager, admiring eyes. Joan flushed a little as she replied:

"I came to bid you good-bye."

"Good-bye? Wherefore?"

"We are going to South America, sir, as soon as we can leave this place."

"Your father is, your brother is, and so is his wife, but you are not going, Joan."

"Yes, sir."

"What, and leave me, when I have come back almost from the dead to you, Joan?" His voice had grown reproachful. "I thought that you would care to nurse me back to life."

"You have come back to life," said Joan, gently disengaging her hands from his. "You have other nurses now."

"So you will leave me without a regret?"

She was silent. Something in her face and attitude seemed to touch him; some look of repressed pain, some sense of proud humility made his brown eyes grow dangerously soft as he gazed at her.

"Joan," he said, in an altered tone, "I have something to say to you. Sit down and listen, will you not?"

She seated herself beside him, wondering at the earnestness of his face and voice. He went on.

"We have lost a great deal of happiness which I believe might have been ours, Joan; yet I think our loss has been a gain to us in some ways. I have learned many things since the old times when I first asked you to be my wife."

"And so have I," said Joan, with a sigh.

"You refused me then, Joan."

"I did. And I was right."

"Well," said Geoffrey, "perhaps you were. I should not have made you happy. And yet I had something to offer you then which I have not now. I shall never be quite what I was, Joan, the doctor says; never a thoroughly strong man again. If you refused to marry me in the days of my prosperity, I ought not to suppose that you would take pity on me now."

There was a silence. Joan darted one quick look at him—was it to see whether he was in earnest?—and dropped her eyes.

"And yet," he went on in a much lower tone, "yet I dare—I dare, Joan, to tell you that I love you. I still dare to ask you to become my wife. And I defy you, Joan, to look me in the face and say that you do not care for me." His brown eyes smiled as they looked at her. "My darling, you brought me back to life; you will not refuse now to make that life a happy one!"

"It would be happy without me," Joan murmured.

"Would it? I shall have weeks and months of weakness yet, they say. Then I shall be sent to Italy or Egypt for my health. Must I go alone? You see how I treat

you ; I do not offer you anything but the chance of helping a sick man back to health and strength, Joan. It is a task you have always loved. Joan, would you fail me ? ”

“ Fail you ? ” She was evidently about to say more, but checked herself. “ Sir Wilfred would not hear of it,” she said, in a subdued voice.

“ On the contrary, I have his full consent. Dear Joan, do you think nobody values you but yourself ? He sees what you have done for me ; he is anxious that I should be happy, and he knows that nobody can make me so but you.”

“ But my father——” Joan began. He would not let her finish the sentence.

“ The one point that I want to settle is this, Joan—not what your father or my father will say, but what you think about the matter. Forgive me if I am importunate—domineering. I have waited so long, Joan. Tell me that you love me, and we will find the right way of acting afterwards.”

Joan yielded. Simply and gravely, without affectation of reserve or prudishness, she placed her hand in his, and said the words he longed to hear—“ Geoffrey, I love you.” And then the difficulties which had seemed to her so great, suddenly vanished into air, and nothing was more natural than that Geoffrey should begin talking of their marriage as the nearest and most certain thing in all the world.

Sir Wilfred's greeting to her was characteristic. He took her hand and looked into her face. “ My dear,” he said, “ you saved my son's life. Help him now to make it a worthy one.”

“ I will do my best,” said Joan. And then she showed him something that she carried in her hand—a gold coin, through which a piece of blue ribbon had been passed. “ You refused to take this, sir, when I brought it to you first. Will you give it to its rightful owner now ? ”

Sir Wilfred took it in some surprise and handed it to Geoffrey.

“ My coin ! ” he said. “ You found it, Joan ? Where ? ”

Joan blushed beautifully. “ Under the sweetbriar

bush near Spences' cottage," she said. "Sir Wilfred would not take it, so I kept it for you."

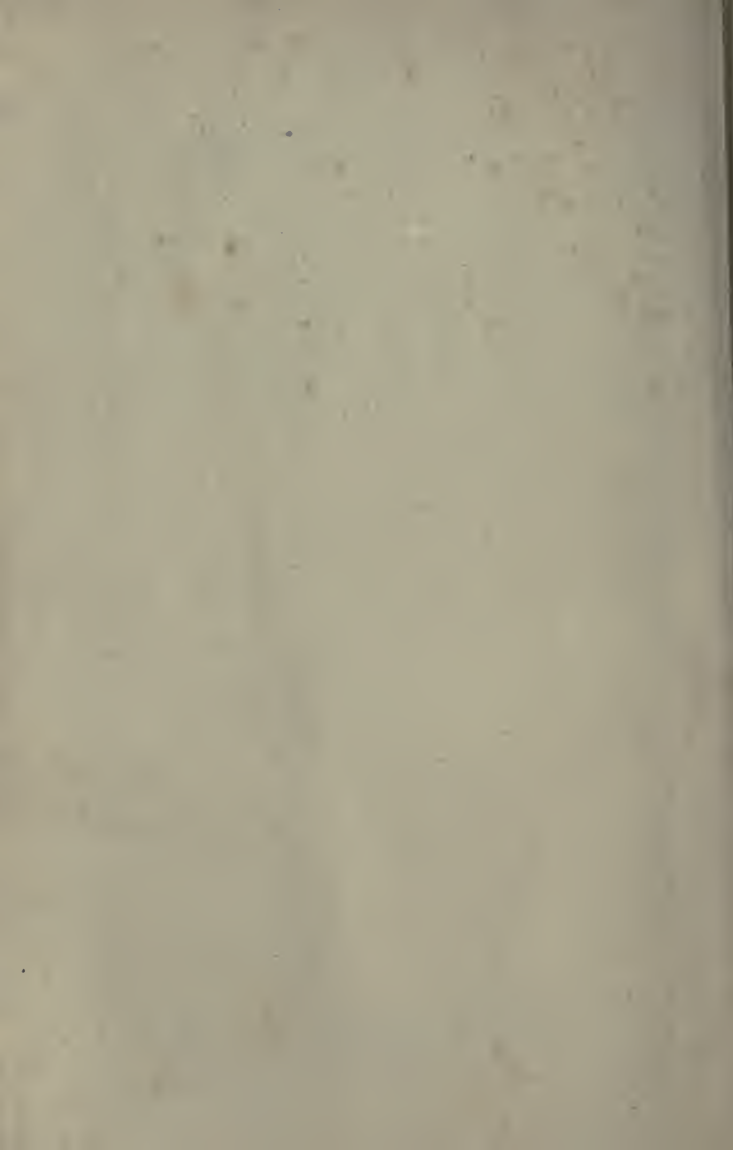
The weary hours of that miserable night recurred to Geoffrey's mind. He drew her down to him and spoke softly—"Did you wear it in memory of me? Oh, Joan, I think there was one time in your life when you did not always speak the truth."

"If there was," said Joan, "I have repented it ever since." And the glow of conscious happiness upon her face caused Sir Wilfred to say, tremulously:

"My dear, you are very beautiful!" Which, as Geoffrey afterwards assured her, was the greatest compliment that Sir Wilfred had ever been known to pay.

THE END





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